

A NOVEL



OKKY MADASARI

**Undang-undang Republik Indonesia Nomor 19 Tahun 2002
Tentang Hak Cipta**

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OKKY MADASARI

86

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Penerbit PT Gramedia Pustaka Utama
Jakarta

 **KOMPAS GRAMEDIA**

86

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First published in Indonesia, in 2015
by Gramedia Pustaka Utama
Kompas Gramedia Building Lt. 5
Jl. Palmerah Barat 29—37
Jakarta 10270
Indonesia

Originally published in 2013 by Gramedia Pustaka Utama under the title
86

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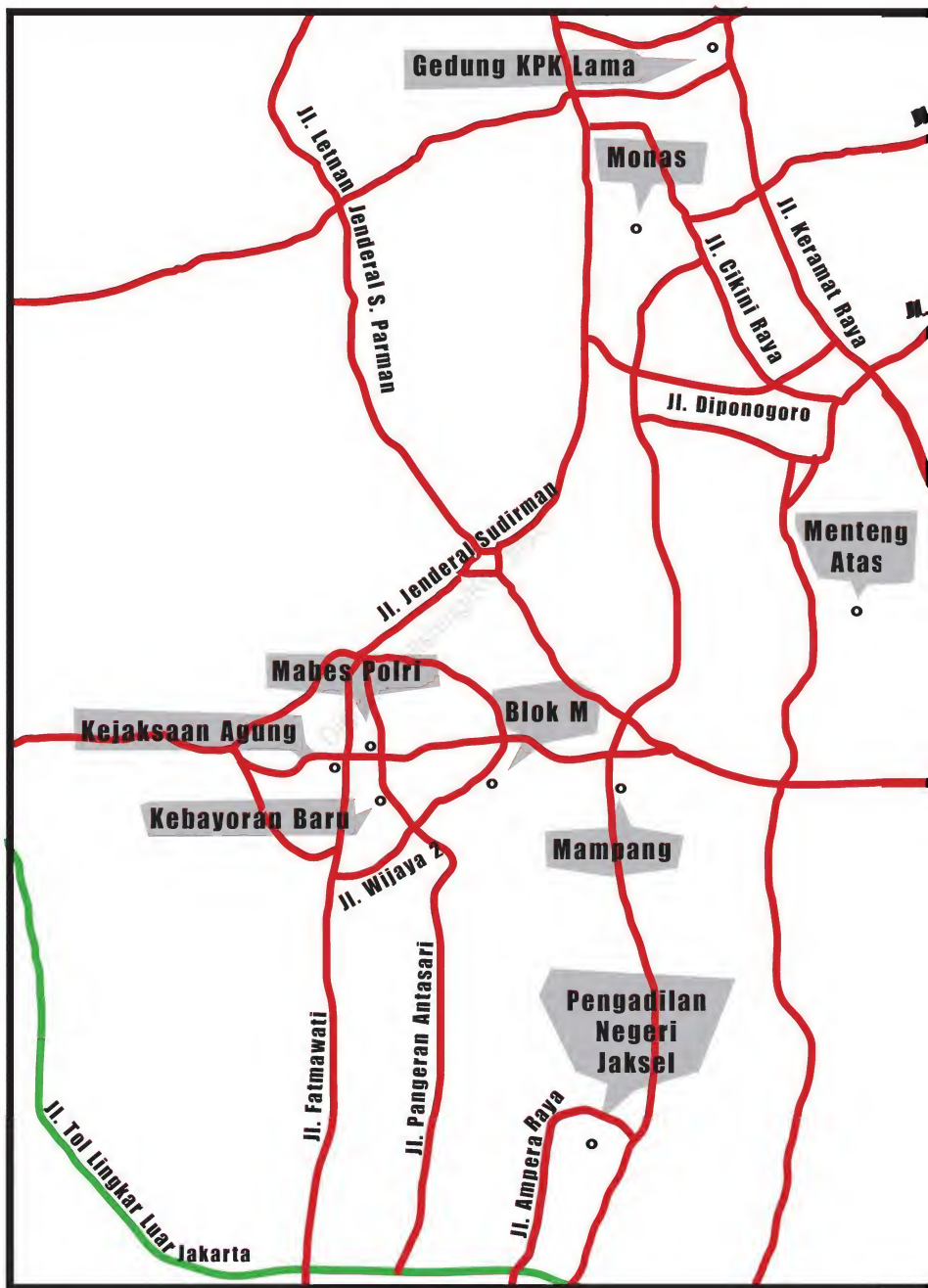
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Gramedia Pustaka Utama

6 15 1 73 005
ISBN 978 - 602 - 03 - 1961 - 2

www.gramediapustakautama.com

Printed and bound in Indonesia by
Percetakan Gramedia, Jakarta, Indonesia





At six-thirty every morning, a market atmosphere descended on this alley with no name. People jostled as they scurried through, weaving through gaps to get ahead. There was the occasional shout for the slow to pick up their pace.

Little children in school uniforms ran through the alley, barging into whoever was in front of them. Things got even rowdier when a motorcyclist tried to get through. The honking and shouts for people to move aside were met by glares and a few muttered oaths. But those walking still yielded, stopping and pressing up against the wall.

The smell of cheap perfume mingled with the stench from the open gutter. In front of three or four of the shacks lining the alley there was always a mother holding her infant as it defecated onto a newspaper, which the mother then scrunched up and threw into the gutter.

It was in this small alley at six-thirty every morning that

Arimbi's life began. She walked among the same crowd, without knowing anyone's name. From the moment she set foot from her rented house, it took her 250 steps to get to the main road, where she waited for a rusty minibus.

It was also in this small alley, as the day darkened, that Arimbi's life ended. There she was, amid the crowd that appeared at the mouth of the alley. They walked hurriedly, jostling again for space, repeating what they had done in the morning. The smell of cheap perfume was gone, in its place the stench of sweat and body odor. The faces which that morning powdered and painted with red lipstick were now all greasy.

One by one the people disappeared behind the doors. They locked them tight and didn't come out again. The alley fell silent and dark. There was only the occasional wail of a baby or the shriek of a wife scolding her husband. But no one cared. Life was over for the day.

For Arimbi, her rented house was only a place to sleep and bathe. She almost never used the small kitchen next to the bathroom. Every day when she returned she turned on the 14-inch television. But she didn't care about the pictures the little box showed. The images and sounds passed unnoticed. They went into her ears and beamed into her eyes, then were absorbed into the walls of the room.

Everything Arimbi did was automatic, like a machine. Always at the same time and in the same way. She went into her house, locked the door with her right hand, doused herself the same number of times when she bathed, lay down to fall asleep at the same time each night, and began her life over again the next morning, repeating what she had done the day before.

Things were a bit different on Saturdays and Sundays. That was when things were fluid and free, when time wasn't boxed off and driving everything that she did. On those two days, six-thirty in the morning didn't mark the moment life began for Arimbi. Even so, her body was programmed to wake up early, whether or not she had work to do. The machine that was her body would also start heating up, demanding to be bathed. And yet Arimbi wasn't going anywhere.

All day long, her body smelling fragrant, Arimbi sat listlessly on the couch near the louver. The TV before her had been running since the night before. But she wasn't watching; instead, she was looking out anxiously at the lifeless alley. She scanned the walls of the tiny houses just like hers, then started at the sight of higher walls, belonging to houses bigger than those around her.

Something went missing when everything was different from normal, even if what was normal was so sickening. The alley felt so lively when people were jostling their way through it. When it was empty like this, it was no different from a graveyard, its presence serving merely to remind one of loneliness and silence. And for two days every week, Arimbi became a part of that graveyard.

She first arrived in this alley four years ago. This was the capital city that she had seen so often on television: The tiny houses pressed up one against the other, the narrow alley lined by a foul-smelling gutter, the people with their glum expressions, and the skinny children with their runny noses.

If she could have chosen, Arimbi would have preferred to stay in her hometown, back in rural Java. It was peaceful there. But what would she have done with herself there? After all the money spent on getting her university degree, how could she

go back to the village? It would have been shameful! An out-of-work graduate. That was what she told herself each time the urge came over her to return to the village.

Arimbi's father and mother were so proud that their child now lived in Jakarta. They told everyone that their daughter worked at a court in Jakarta, alongside prosecutors and judges. But the truth was that she was simply a junior clerk who also made photocopies.

They didn't care what it was Arimbi did every day, though. All that mattered for them was that their child was an official, that she wore a uniform every day and received a salary. When she was old and no longer worked, she would receive a pension every month. That was their highest aspiration. For Arimbi's parents, their child's station in life was now magnitudes higher than theirs as farmers. Their own livelihood came from a single yearly harvest of their orange crop. In a good season, they could get twenty-five million for their crop. In a bad season, they would have to make do with ten million. They made it last for a year, until the next harvest. It was a good thing Arimbi was an only child. Even though they barely made ends meet and never had anything extra to spend, her parents still managed to make enough to raise her.

"All that matters is that you don't have to struggle like your mother and me. You can live comfortably now, get a salary every month," her father told her over and over.

The money from the orange harvest put Arimbi through university. It wasn't one of the top schools, just a private college in Solo. She came home once a month to pick up three hundred and fifty thousand rupiah for her expenses.

In Solo, Arimbi also lived in a dead-end alley. She rented

a room in an old house. But the alley she lived in now was far more desolate and boring than the one in Solo.

The alley in Solo was always empty. Morning, afternoon, until night, few people ever passed through. There were only eight houses along the alley, almost all of them inhabited by elderly people who no longer worked. They would stay in their houses all day long, whiling away the day watching TV or talking with their elderly neighbors.

The only noise ever heard in the alley was the crying of a three-year-old girl who lived next door to Arimbi's boarding house. It was just the girl and her grandmother; the parents worked in the capital.

Every afternoon when she got back from class, Arimbi would see the little girl playing on her own outside her house. She would make sand castles from the mounds of black dirt that lined the edge of the alley. She had no one to play with. She was the only child in the alley.

One day Arimbi went up to the girl. A look of surprise flashed through the child's eyes when she saw Arimbi standing before her. Then she looked back down and continued playing without saying a word. Arimbi sat down beside her. She began chitchatting, asking the girl what she was up to.

The child didn't answer. She kept her head bowed. She turned away until she had her back to Arimbi. Arimbi fell silent; she didn't ask any more questions. She grabbed a fistful of dirt. She built a tall wall, a sloped roof, and made indents with her thumb to create windows. Arimbi was making a large house; two stories tall; with lots of windows.

It had been a long time since Arimbi had last made playhouses like that. When she was still a child, up until she finished the sixth grade, she enjoyed making houses from the

earth. She used to make them in her front yard. She would dredge the earth with a rock, and once she had a heap of it, start building a house. During the hot season, the ground was dry and dusty. It was hard to make houses with that kind of earth. Arimbi would get some water and pour a little at a time until the earth was moist and pliable.

She and her friends would compare the houses that each other built. And Arimbi's houses were always the biggest, the tallest, and the most beautiful. She always said that when she grew up and started working, she would have a big, beautiful house just like those.

Once she got into middle school, she stopped playing with the earth. People said that such games were for little children. Middle school students were beyond that sort of thing. Arimbi complied. She forgot about the earth houses. She played the games that middle school students were supposed to play. She collected ribbons and colorful hairbands. She also tended to the pimples on her cheeks, and to her skin that seemed to grow darker with each passing day.

Arimbi no longer dreamed of having a big, beautiful house. Like her friends, all she wanted was a boyfriend with a motorbike. She wanted to ride with him to school, and later ride with him to the town square. But Arimbi never found a boyfriend in middle school; not even when she went to college in Solo.

There she was, a university student in the city, and instead of going around with a boy, she was playing sandcastles with a three-year-old girl. She returned to the houses she once knew: large, tall, with lots of windows.

"My house is done!" Arimbi called out as the first sand house that she had built as an adult took shape.

The little girl had been watching quietly as Arimbi worked. She studied every move of Arimbi's hands, and tried to mimic them with her own fistful of dirt. But it didn't work.

"Do you want it?" Arimbi asked as she looked the little girl in the eye. The girl looked away, avoiding Arimbi's gaze. But a moment later she nodded.

Arimbi took the child's hand and pulled it toward her. The girl didn't resist. Arimbi took another fistful of dirt to start building a new house. The girl would build it. Arimbi taught her, helping her each time part of the structure collapsed. When the house was finally done, the girl's eyes lit up with joy. She looked at Arimbi and smiled.

"Hurray! It's done!" Arimbi cried out as she clapped. The child clapped too.

"What's your name? Mine's Arimbi."

The girl answered slowly, "Sekar."

The two of them became friends from that moment on. Every day after she got back from class, Arimbi would build sand houses with the girl. If Arimbi didn't appear, Sekar would go into the boarding house and knocked on Arimbi's door. The landlady would tell Arimbi about it. She would laugh and say, "Your child was looking for you."

Arimbi laughed in response.

She called the landlady Mrs. Woro. Her hair was white and her body hunched over. She looked much older than her age, which was 51. That was if she really was born in 1945, as she often claimed. No one knew the truth. There were no documents, no testimony.

She always claimed to have been born on Aug. 17, 1945. Arimbi was skeptical. What were the odds of being born on that particularly auspicious day? Even though no one expressed

their doubts out loud, Mrs. Woro seemed to know that people didn't believe her. She would talk at great lengths about the events surrounding her birth.

She told the story over and over again of how her father was listening to the radio address by Soekarno when her mother was going into labor. She also told of how her father was killed by a bomb when she was just four years old. Of course Mrs. Woro didn't know about those incidents firsthand. She only knew about them from her mother.

She told those stories at every opportunity. Some days she would knock on Arimbi's door and invite her to a meal. Arimbi accepted every time. Who could refuse an invitation from an old woman whose only companion throughout the day was the television?

Mrs. Woro had three rooms to let in her house, but for whatever reason Arimbi was the only tenant. Arimbi's only concern when she chose to move in was to find someplace cheap. It cost five thousand rupiah per month. Where else could she find a room that cheap?

The alley was widely known as Old Alley. Nearly everyone knew that the dead-end street was inhabited by old women, husbandless and childless. The houses were just as old as their inhabitants. They were shabby and dull. The paint had faded and never been refreshed. The wooden doors were falling apart. The alley was more like a warehouse, a place to store old knickknacks that one couldn't part with. There wasn't the slightest pulse of life or sign of modernity.

A lot of people looking for a boarding room turned away the moment they reached the mouth of the alley. A few ventured further in, knocked on two or three doors, then retreated in a hurry. Some spoke with the homeowners, old

women who were probably the same age as their grandmothers. They went into rooms that had rarely been aired out, musty and dark, with ancient furniture. The only thing that seemed modern was the television found in each house.

The visitors would ask how many other people boarded at the house, and the owner would say there were none. They would then ask if anyone else lived there, and the owner would shake her head.

Naturally none of these visitors wanted to waste their university years among all that ancient furniture and old women. It would be more enjoyable to live in an alley with other young people, who were always full of energy from morning until the next morning. They preferred to have to quarrel over the use of a shared bathroom with other lodgers than to live with an old woman. Arimbi was the only one who chose differently, and she did so for one reason only: the low cost. And she stayed there until she got her degree.

For four years, in that alley that never made a sound, Arimbi befriended the old women. There were those who had family that lived elsewhere, and those who had no one. Some of the women lived on pensions, while others received stipends, and a few got by on what their neighbors could spare each day. Mrs. Woro lived off the rent that Arimbi paid her each month. It was a mystery how she never went wanting.

Besides the old women, Arimbi also had Sekar. Her little friend was always with her, waiting for her, for four years. Arimbi remembered how Sekar cried when she packed up all her belongings. Sekar came with her as she visited all eight houses in the alley to bid farewell to the old women who had all become like grandmothers to her. They whispered prayers in Arimbi's ear. They wished her honor, happiness, and of

course an immediate marriage. Arimbi nodded. She wanted to laugh. But everyone else shed tears.

That was the last time Arimbi was ever with them or in Solo. She left for the capital to take the civil service exam. She got a job after her first attempt at the exam. She would be a civil servant in an office full of judges. Arimbi told her father and mother back in the village. They said it was a blessing. They slaughtered one of their goats right away. Arimbi's father held a thanksgiving ceremony, where he invited all the men of the village to pray and to share in the blessings.

Arimbi's parents believed that all their hopes and prayers of more than twenty years were starting to be fulfilled. This was the start of a new station in life for this family of farmers who couldn't read a single letter of the alphabet. Their child would no longer till the earth or work covered in dirt all day. Through Arimbi, the family would join a new class. They would be part of the educated and respected class, the class of those who worked in clean clothes, with arms that didn't bulge with muscles, with skin that was fair because they worked indoors. Arimbi was an office worker. She was no longer a peasant like her parents.

* * *

First Monday of July

The television that had been on all night was off when Arimbi woke up. Half her room was shrouded in darkness. Only the area right around the window was somewhat light. The clock on her mobile phone showed it was 5:43. It was still too early to leave, but too late to go back to sleep.

Arimbi tried to turn the television back on. But it remained lifeless. She checked the cables. Nothing had changed from the day before. She flicked the switch next to the television. The light stayed off. She looked through her window at the other houses along the alley. The lights were still on in some of them. In a few houses where the curtains had been drawn open, the lights from the televisions was reflected against the window panes. Her house was the only one where the lights were out.

Arimbi checked the electricity meter on the outside wall. The trip switch was in the on position. The switch wasn't the problem. The electricity company had cut off her power. Arimbi cursed silently. How could they have cut off the power to only her house, while the other houses around her with which she shared the same walls were all lit up? Perhaps they drew lots every night, with each lot containing the address of a different customer. The address that was picked was the one that got its power cut off, she thought.

Arimbi took a deep breath, then exhaled with a grunt. Anyone who heard her would know that she was seething. Arimbi went into her pitch-black bathroom. There wasn't the slightest gap for any light to enter. She came out just moments later, then slammed the door shut.

"Fucking power company!"

The tub was empty. She'd forgotten to leave the tap last night, when the lights were still on. But who knew the power would be cut off this morning? Arimbi poured some water from a gallon of drinking water. She used it to brush her teeth and wash her face. But she couldn't wash the rage off her face. The anger showed in her tired eyes; her face was drawn, her lips pursed more than usual.

Arimbi sniffed her armpit. It smelled stale after a night

bathed in her own sweat. She didn't want to bathe with the drinking water, for which she paid eight thousand rupiah every ten days. Arimbi rubbed on deodorant. The liquid deodorant stuck to her moist armpits. The smells mingled. It didn't smell like deodorant, nor did it smell like sweat. After changing from her nightdress into her uniform, Arimbi sprayed perfume onto nearly every part of her torso, more so than usual. The rented room filled up with the stinging and sometimes nauseating smell of cheap perfume.

Everything was conspiring to make this a bad day for Arimbi. It was a Monday, the day everyone hated, when work piled up and all the roads were backed up with traffic.

Arimbi made her way down the alley faster than usual. She raced past the people in front of her, weaving in and out of the gaps between the crowds that thronged the length of the alley. She wanted to rid herself of the bad luck of that morning. She needed to get as far away from the source of that bad luck as she could and start her day off with a bit of breathing room so that everything would run as normal.

Arimbi didn't have to wait very long to catch a Kopaja bus heading in the direction of her office. And as usual, there wasn't a single empty seat inside during the morning rush hour. People stood crammed together, body parts wedged up against one another. The women clutched their bags over their bosoms, both to keep their belongings safe from pickpockets and to shield their breasts from any bodily contact with others. Arimbi could only find room near the door. The bus was too full for her to go any further inside. Even so, the conductor kept shouting for people to press inside. Arimbi ignored the shouting just behind her. She pretended not to hear, while

looking straight ahead at the car-choked street. She clutched her brown imitation leather bag tight.

The Kopaja crawled along the length of Mampang. It stopped outside a television station. No passengers were alighting; it had just stopped, not moving forward. Before them snaked a line of cars, also not moving. It was the same in the lane next to the bus, and behind it. Everything had come to a standstill. Only the motorcycles could still move, threading their way in the gaps between the bigger vehicles, sometimes knocking a wing mirror and leaving little scratches in the paintwork of the shiny private cars.

Arimbi stared at the television station through the open door in front of her. A large logo made up of two triangles was perched on the roof of the building. People in black uniforms could be seen going in and out of the building. On the sidewalk, right next to where the Kopaja was idling, people in black uniforms walked by. Some went toward the building, and others away from it.

Arimbi smiled. She was reminded of people in that same uniform arriving at her workplace. Not just the people from this television station, but from other stations too, with uniforms of various colors. There were blue uniforms and red, even orange. On certain days they would show up in droves.

When she first began working, Arimbi was proud to see those people. They worked for the television stations that she watched every day. It also pleased her to see the faces of the people who worked at the newspapers that she read. She watched their every move, tried to catch everything they spoke about with the judges or prosecutors. She laughed with them when one fell as they flocked around a detainee.

At night, when the images on the TV showed what she

had seen at her workplace, Arimbi would swell with joy and cry out, "I was there!"

In the images on TV, she would often see her own face, lost amid the crowds. She once saw a clip of herself walking into a room. There was also a clip of her talking with a colleague in the front yard. It made Arimbi proud and want to declare to everyone, "I'm on TV!"

The next day, as soon as she arrived at work, she would pick up the latest newspaper. She would look for photographs taken of her workplace and read every story about the incidents that transpired there. She would nod in satisfaction if what she read was the same as what she thought. And she would grumble to herself if what she read was different from what she saw and heard.

That was then, when she was still new to the place. In time it all became a daily routine; Arimbi saw hundreds of events, watched hundreds of clips and read hundreds of articles, and all the feelings of joy and pride and curiosity vanished. Now Arimbi saw the people in the television station uniforms the same way she saw everyone else in uniform. They were identical. There was no differentiating them, so many were they.

She used to feel proud whenever she saw someone famous, but now there was nothing special about it. She could easily see dozens of famous faces every day at work. She used to deliberately walk within view of the cameras so that she would appear on TV, but now she cursed the cameras that trained on her as she ate fruit outside her room. The only thing that hadn't changed was the telephone call she got from her parents when they saw her face on television. Arimbi laughed at the thought of it.

The Kopaja was stuck outside the television station for a quarter of an hour. Finally it resumed its slow crawl down Mampang toward Blok M, the air inside heavy with the stench of sweat. As it passed through the Kebayoran Baru area, the bus stopped for a moment outside a row of big houses with spacious yards. Some of the judges from Arimbi's workplace lived in this area. Arimbi knew this from her work in administration. Several times she'd written out Judge Dewabrata's address, on Jalan Kertanegara No. 50, Kebayoran Baru, or Judge Bagus Siahaan, who lived on Jalan Empu Sendok No. 21, Kebayoran Baru. Arimbi smiled bitterly as she thought of the rented house she had been living in for the past four years. Who knew how long it would be before she could have a big house like those she had built as a child?

The bus continued its slow journey south, then got stuck again in another long line that barely budged. Up ahead was a crowd of people carrying banners and posters with all kinds of writing on them. There was also a giant picture of someone in a prosecutor's uniform. One of his eyes had been painted over with a black marker, turning the prosecutor into a pirate. Beneath the picture were the words "Attorney General", crossed out; instead, someone had written "Pirate General".

Arimbi cringed. That was all she needed for this to be a terrible day. The Kopaja wouldn't move until the demonstrators were done. And Arimbi would have to jostle for space in the searing heat of the sun. The perfume and deodorant could no longer mask the stale smell and the stickiness of her sweat from the night before and from the whole time she had been stuck in the Kopaja.

Arimbi decided to get off the bus. She walked between the cars standing still on the road and began to pick her way

through the rows of demonstrators. The shouting and shrill sounds of the megaphone rang in her ears.

The crowd was much bigger than she'd expected, and finding her way through it wasn't as easy as she'd hoped. For more than half an hour she walked through the tangle, past cars, past people, and got caught again in a line of cars. At the end of the street, Arimbi caught a bus heading toward her workplace. She was an hour and a half late.

Mondays were always a busy day for Arimbi. Vans from various television stations were already packed into the parking lot out front. Cars belonging to visitors filled up the rest of the lot, some of them spilling out onto the main road. People congregated in the lobby, in the canteen, and in the courtrooms. People without uniforms even flitted about in the room where Arimbi worked. She went up to her desk without greeting anyone. She sat in her chair and opened her bag, searching for a comb and a tissue to wipe away the sweat of her face.

"Hey, you just got in?" a middle-aged woman asked as she tapped Arimbi on the shoulder from behind.

"Oh, Mrs. Danti," Arimbi said, half-surprised. "There was a protest."

"Oh, you went that way too? I got stuck in my car and couldn't move at all. I only just got in as well," Mrs. Danti said, pointing toward her desk. It was still tidy. She hadn't even opened the bag that she'd put down on the desk.

"Anyway, I want some coffee. I'm sleepy," she said as she walked out of the room.

Mrs. Danti was a clerk and Arimbi's superior. She had worked in the courts for twenty years. She'd moved around from place to place, until finally she ended up in South Jakarta. She was sociable and talkative, and had no airs about greeting

her subordinates before they greeted her. In the four years that Arimbi had worked there, she had never seen Mrs. Danti get angry at one of her subordinates.

At 45, Mrs. Danti always looked fresh and beautiful. She had a stout frame, the fat wobbling on her belly and arms. She always looked fashionable despite her uniform. She changed her shoes and her bag every two days to match the color of the uniform she wore. Her face was fair and glowed with a full complement of makeup. Eye shadow, blush, lipstick, even mascara and eyeliner – all of it spotlessly applied. Her hair was shoulder length and buffed at the sides and on top. She never forgot to wear a chain, earrings and rings. Some of her jewelry was studded with diamonds, others with pearls. She also had plain gold jewelry.

Arimbi could still smell Mrs. Danti's perfume even though she was out of sight. It was a pleasant and fresh scent, not heady. Arimbi raised her arm and sniffed at her armpit, sweaty after jostling through a crowd of hundreds and basted in the exhaust fumes of all kinds of vehicles. She sprayed on some more of the cheap perfume that was in her bag.

Arimbi began going through the stack of papers on her desk. They were all items that needed to be retyped, collated and photocopied. She skimmed through them, picking which ones to do first. She glanced at the clock. It was ten-thirty. She had to be at a hearing at one o'clock. She yawned as she picked out a folder marked "Urgent" by Mrs. Danti.

The papers inside the folder were covered in Judge Dewabrata's handwriting, as was typical with rulings in any case. The handwriting was no better than Arimbi's when she was in the third grade. Arimbi often had trouble differentiating

between certain words, such as "*denda*"¹ or "*benda*"², and "*jalan*"³ or "*jajan*"⁴. If she couldn't make out a word, she read the sentence again over and over, then made a guess at the closest meaning. If she was still flummoxed, she would show it to two colleagues and ask them what they thought it said. Mrs. Danti hadn't complained about it yet, and neither had the judges.

Arimbi had only finished typing up one page when the clock struck twelve. She marked the paper she was working on by folding the top corner of the page. She left her computer on and went to the canteen, where all the court employees and visitors went to eat.

All the long benches in the canteen were full. Dozens of people ate standing up. Others got their food to go so they could eat someplace else.

Arimbi looked around for a vacant seat. She also looked for her two colleagues, who had gone out to lunch before her. She saw Mrs. Danti sitting on a bench in the far corner, speaking with two young men wearing ties. There were two glasses of coffee in front of Mrs. Danti. One was full and the other was down to the coffee dregs. Mrs. Danti had been there the whole time since she left Arimbi saying she needed some coffee. As usual, she looked so easygoing, talking and laughing.

"Mbi...! Mbi...!"

Someone was calling Arimbi. She looked around and saw an arm waving at her. It was Anisa, Arimbi's colleague who also worked under Mrs. Danti. Anisa was three years older

¹ A fine or penalty

² An object

³ To walk

⁴ To eat a snack

than Arimbi, but they looked the same age. She was Arimbi's closest friend in the office. She was great to get along with, both as a colleague and as a friend to chat with. Anisa often spoke about her child, who was three years old, and her husband, who was a bureaucrat in the State Secretariat. She knew a lot about the people in the court. Her tales about Mrs. Danti's infidelity or Judge Siswono's mistress kept Arimbi amused day after day.

There was a third person who worked under Mrs. Danti. His name was Wahendra and he was ten years older than Arimbi. He was a distant nephew of Mr. Syamsudin, the administration chief of the court they worked in. His work was never any better than Arimbi's or Anisa's. It wasn't that he was lazy; he just wasn't capable of doing any better.

He was friendly and sociable, and had countless times charmed Anisa and Arimbi into doing his work. Mrs. Danti also liked him. She often took him with her when she had business to attend to outside the office. Wahendra also had lots of friends whom he brought to the office and introduced to Mrs. Danti.

Anisa shared her seat with Arimbi. They sat bunched up together on the bench. Anisa had finished half of her mutton soup and rice. Arimbi ordered the same.

"Are you going to a hearing after this?"

Arimbi nodded. "It's a new one. Another land dispute."

"Dewabrata?" Anisa asked as she sipped on her orange juice.

Arimbi nodded again.

"Ah, that's a cinch! His trials never last long."

Arimbi laughed. "Yeah, I was lucky to get him. The hearing

should be over in less than three hours. Six hearings and he's got a ruling."

Anisa burst out laughing. "And it works out best for us, right?"

Anisa then leaned in and whispered in Arimbi's ear, "Not like that Sis, whose hearings go on forever. And he talks in a whisper."

Arimbi laughed out loud.

Anisa continued whispering, "Hey, look at that guy over there with Mrs. Danti."

"Is that the guy?" Arimbi asked incredulously. Anisa enjoyed talking about Mrs. Danti and her much younger lover. But the two men with her now were beyond young; they could have been her sons.

"Which one? The one in the white shirt or the blue shirt?" Arimbi asked.

"White."

Arimbi looked closely at the man Anisa was talking about. He looked dapper in his long-sleeved white shirt. The word "Boss" was embroidered in small letters on his shirt pocket. He had a red tie with black stripes. He had an attractive face, fair though slightly oily, and an aquiline nose.

"He's a lawyer, isn't he?"

Anisa nodded.

"How could he possibly be having an affair with Mrs. Danti?" Arimbi whispered in Anisa's ear. "Don't talk nonsense."

"Hey, I've seen him pick her up lots of times. They go out together a lot."

"Well, maybe it's for work."

"That's an awful lot of work. And when she goes out to

meet him, she always makes sure to put on her full makeup. And after she gets back, her cheeks are red and she laughs the whole day long.”

Arimbi laughed at Anisa’s revelation.

”And besides, Mrs. Danti once said she’d just come back from meeting Albert at some hotel, but I forget which one.”

”His name’s Albert?”

Anisa nodded. Arimbi laughed again. She had finished her meal. The canteen wasn’t as crowded now. Mrs. Danti was still talking with the two men.

”Well, I’ve got to go. The hearing’s about to start.”

”Shhh!” Anisa pulled Arimbi back down onto the bench. She whispered, ”There was another one before. This one’s new.”

Arimbi laughed and quickly got up again. ”Tell me all about it later,” she called out as she left the canteen.

Anisa waved in reply. She didn’t follow Arimbi back to work, but ordered a plate of fruit. While she waited, she kept an eye on what her boss was up to.

The canteen was empty by now. The two benches between Anisa and Mrs. Danti were no longer occupied. There were only four other people, on a bench in a corner, caught up in their own conversation. Mrs. Danti wasn’t laughing any more. The expression on her face was serious, and she was leaning in close to the two men. They lowered their voices, half-whispering.

Anisa strained to hear them. She caught just one sentence, from the man in the white shirt: ”You can’t?”

Mrs. Danti didn’t say anything. She just shook her head, then called over the drinks vendor and ordered a bottle of tea for herself.

The man's face turned red and even oilier. It was obvious that he was upset and impatient. But Mrs. Danti took her time sipping on her bottled tea.

"Well, that's how it is, usually," she said, not whispering this time. She was speaking normally, and her expression no longer serious, but calm and relaxed.

The man leaned toward her. "So all of the previous stuff, what was that for?" he half-shouted. Anisa could only imagine how jarring that would have been on Mrs. Danti's ears. The half-shout went unnoticed by everyone else, because they were too busy in their own affairs and because of the music playing over the canteen's speakers. Besides, speaking in a high tone didn't necessarily indicate anger or animosity. If Anisa hadn't been watching them, she wouldn't have thought that they were having a tense moment.

Again Mrs. Danti replied in her relaxed manner, "Business is business."

She stood up and called the food vendor over so she could pay. When she was done, she turned to the two men and said playfully, "I'll be off, then. Lots of other things to do."

Her rather full bottom swung from side to side as she left the canteen. Anisa also left right away, taking the rest of her fruit with her. She slowed down as she approached the bench where Mrs. Danti had sat. She passed within an arm's length of the man in the white shirt and his friend who hadn't spoken that much the whole time, and tried to hear what they were saying.

"Just sweeten the pot, bro, or it's just going to get more complicated."

"Ah, you. It was a waste paying you to go out with her if in the end I still have to pay out," said the man in the blue shirt.

"Well, what can you do, bro? That's the price. Or else this whole thing will never be settled.

* * *

The courtroom was full when Arimbi walked in. The benches in the public gallery were occupied from front to back, with not a single empty space. A group of well-built men stood near the entrance. Arimbi took her seat behind the row of judges' chairs. She studied the people in the room. She'd never seen this many people turn up for a hearing into a land dispute before.

It was five past one when the three judges emerged from the door behind Arimbi. The buzz in the room immediately fell silent. To the right were four sharp-looking young men, their hair neatly cut and their complexions clear and shiny. They must have powdered their faces before coming into the courtroom, Arimbi thought. Perhaps they also regularly went to the salon, which would explain their smooth skin. Even cloaked in the folds of their sagging black robes they looked fashionable and attractive.

This wasn't the first time Arimbi had seen these four young men. They were frequent visitors to the court, representing clients in all kinds of cases. Seated next to them today was an elderly ethnic Chinese man. His eyes were narrow slits. His forehead was furrowed and he had multiple folds of fat beneath his chin. A few white hairs sprouted on his bald pate. He was dressed in a black suit with a white shirt and blue tie.

On the left was a larger group of people. Four of them were seated on the front bench, and another four on the bench

behind them. At the very left end sat an elderly woman. She reminded Arimbi of Mrs. Danti. Her face glowed from her heavy makeup, topped by a hair bun, and she wore a light green blouse with flower motifs, paired with a knee-length black skirt, with a shiny pearl necklace and earrings to complete the look.

Judge Dewabrata, seated in the middle and highest chair, spoke. Then someone from the right side started reading from a bound stack of papers. Arimbi dealt with papers on a daily basis, and she knew that a bundle that thick easily contained more than three hundred pages. Arimbi could see Judge Dewabrata's head drooped to his right several times, and she lost count of the number of times he yawned. Many of the people in the public gallery had their eyes shut. Arimbi leaned her elbows on her desk and cupped her chin in her hands. Her eyes were red and she felt drowsy. She closed her eyes a few times, only to wake up with a start a moment later. She had nothing to do today. All the files would be handed to her. She just needed to wait and jot down a few sentences from Judge Dewabrata, about when the next hearing would be convened.

For more than two hours the four men took turns reading from their file. Those listening couldn't disguise their boredom any longer. The people in the public gallery were chatting with one another, and there was a buzz in the courtroom. But the judges didn't call for silence. They were all asleep in their own ways. Judge Dewabrata had his hands on the table before him and his head hanging down. His eyes were closed and he was fast asleep. To his left, Judge Harsono had leaned back into his high seat. His right hand covered his face. He was also asleep. At the other end of the bench, Judge Siswono was resting his head in his left hand, his elbow propped up on the arm of his

chair. In his right hand, he held a pen, poised as though he was about to write something down. He was snoring softly. All the talking inside the courtroom and outside soon turned into a cacophony. The indistinct buzz of earlier was now a wave of voices, all loud but still indistinct.

"Your honor... your honor... Don't believe them, your honor! They're thieves!"

A woman had suddenly appeared in the front of the courtroom. All the noise vanished as though sucked away. The room fell silent once more. The man reading the complaint also stopped talking. The three judges, fast asleep just a moment ago, bolted wide awake and looked startled. Judge Dewabrata reached for the gavel in front of him and pounded the table.

"What on earth is this? Bailiffs, take care of this. You're disrupting a court hearing!"

Four bailiffs rushed toward the front of the room. Two of them grabbed the woman by each arm, while the other two prepared to lead her out. The woman resisted and tried to stay in the room. She shouted, "The land is mine, your honor! It belongs to my parents! They're trying to take it away!" She cried as she shouted. She wasn't standing upright by this point. She was bent over double as the bailiffs dragged her away, her feet stamping on the floor.

The television camera crews rushed to the front of the courtroom. But they were too late to immortalize the moment. The situation grew even more boisterous as people from outside the courtroom piled inside, forcing their way into the already packed space to get to the front. The two burly bailiffs holding the woman looked overwhelmed, not just because she was a big woman, but also because of her kicking and struggling. Her shouting grew louder and filled the room. She

accused the two parties now in court of being thieves, claiming the land they were fighting over was hers.

The bailiffs lost their patience with her. The two who weren't holding her arms now grabbed her legs. She continued to writhe and flail her legs. But struggle as she might, she couldn't break free. They carried her outside, but even from a distance her voice could still be heard in the courtroom. The last thing Arimbi heard her shout was "Allahu akbar!"

Judge Dewabrata banged his gavel again to bring the court to order. The plaintiffs still had several more pages to read through. The man who had been reading last resumed. No one was dozing off now. But they weren't listening, either. Everyone was on alert, anticipating what kind of ruckus would break out next. None of them wanted to miss a thing. They wanted to witness it all for themselves.

But nothing remarkable happened by the time Judge Dewabrata banged his gavel twice to adjourn the hearing for the day. Everyone let out a long breath of both relief and disappointment: relieved because the hearing was over, but disappointed because they hadn't witnessed anything else that would doubtless make the news. They would meet again in this very room in seven days' time, at the same time.

Back at home that night, Arimbi flipped through the channels on her TV, trying to find a clip of the woman she had seen earlier in the day. That was the first time she had seen anything like that in her four years of working at the courthouse. Her eyes and ears had been numbed to everything for so long, but now here was something that thrilled her and made her want to shout to everyone watching the clip, "I was there!"

The images on the TV showed the woman being hauled

out of the courtroom. The cameras followed her and caught everything she said. She was placed in another room under heavy guard. She wasn't shouting anymore, but still crying. In between her sobs she answered the questions posed by the reporters.

A name popped up at the bottom of the screen: Maemunah. She repeated what she had said in the courtroom, in more detail this time. "They're thieves. That's my land. My house is on it. I've lived there since I was born."

The TV switched to a clip of an old house, not very big. It sat in a sprawling yard fenced off all around with a chest-high wall. Then images of people crying, shouting, thrashing about. One of them was Maemunah. Men in uniform stood guard outside the house while brawny men not wearing uniforms emptied the house of its contents and piled them up in front of the line of uniformed men.

A voice on the TV said that clip had been shot two weeks earlier in Jagakarsa, an area of South Jakarta now being taken over by tall buildings. A new toll road ran through the area. The house in the TV clip was located near the highway. The voice on the TV said ownership of the house and land was now under dispute. Arimbi didn't quite catch the two names mentioned, but she knew they had to be the two individuals at the hearing that afternoon.

The TV switched back to Maemunah at the courthouse.

"So whose land is that really?" asked someone from behind the camera.

"It belongs to my family. It was bequeathed by my grandfather to my father. Everyone's dead now, so it belongs to me."

"Do you have the title deed?"

"Here. Here's the deed. It's legitimate!"

Maemunah held out a sheaf of papers. It wasn't very thick, tucked into a blue folder with the Garuda⁵ printed on the front. The camera zoomed in on the folder. The Garuda filled the entire TV screen. Then the image switched again, this time to the courtroom and the man reading out from the thick stack of papers. Arimbi smiled when she saw Judge Dewabrata dozing. Behind him she could see herself resting her chin on her hands.

At work the next day, the first thing Arimbi did was go through the newspapers. Two of them carried large photos of Maemunah being dragged out of the courtroom. Another carried the story with a smaller photo next to it.

"There's never been anything like it before," Anisa said from her desk. "The worst that's happened is a brawl outside the courthouse," she added while pointing to the front yard.

"Poor woman. She doesn't have a home anymore."

"Well, what did you expect? The land had been sold, after all," Anisa said quickly.

"Says who?"

"Mrs. Danti."

"But she's got the title deed," Arimbi said in surprise.

"Anyone can get a title deed."

Arimbi didn't answer. She got down to work typing up the rulings that Mrs. Danti had marked "Urgent". She had only one case to attend all month, with hearings once a week, on Mondays; the case whose first hearing had been disrupted by Maemunah's appearance.

⁵ The national emblem of the Republic of Indonesia. Typically found on official documents.

There were more uniformed men than usual the next Monday. They lined up along the curb outside the courthouse and up to the entrance, checking everyone going into the courtroom. There were also more men who were not in uniform. They congregated in the yard in two large, separate groups. In the courtroom, officials had divided the public gallery into two distinct halves, one of the groups on the right and the other on the left.

Maemunah didn't show up again. Arimbi saw her once on the TV. She was at the police station, sitting on a bench in the far corner of a room. She was crying. There was a horde of cameras pointed at her, and a crowd of people relentlessly asking her questions. But Maemunah didn't say anything.

The TV switched to a clip of a man in a police uniform. He was tall and good-looking. He spoke a lot, answering every question from the reporters around him. He would glance at the person asking, then quickly focus his gaze on the screen, right into Arimbi's eyes. He spoke in a calm and polished manner, the kind that made people want to listen and believe him. That was what Arimbi felt too.

She understood now that Maemunah had a fake title deed. The policeman said she had been living on someone else's land for years and claiming it was bequeathed to her by her family. "It had been sold off long ago, during the time of her great-grandfather."

Since then, Maemunah never appeared again on TV. Instead, Arimbi saw more images of herself, typing away behind Judge Dewabrata's back. The news reports only repeated what she'd already seen, heard and noted herself. Everything went back to normal.

On the eighth Monday, the courthouse was busier than

usual. A whole crowd had been bussed in on four Kopajas. The normally heavy traffic on the main road outside the courthouse had slowed to a crawl.

This would be the final hearing. That's what people liked about Judge Dewabrata – he finished things off quickly. But it was another of Judge Dewabrata's habits that Arimbi took issue with. He never typed his rulings out on a computer. He preferred to write them by hand on faded paper. And as usual, Arimbi would have to transcribe his barely legible scrawl.

Judge Siswono read out the first part of the ruling. He spoke softly and slowly. He coughed a few times while reading. Judge Harsono then read out the next part. It was a relief to hear him read. His delivery was louder and he went through his bit quickly. Judge Dewabrata was to read the last part. This was the part everyone was waiting for.

The land belonged to Susanah Setiawan. That was what Judge Dewabrata read out. The woman sitting on the right side of the courtroom covered her face with her hands for a moment, then smiled wide, her large earrings swaying. She looked at the people sitting next to her and they smiled back at her. The man sitting at the end of the bench raised both thumbs and laughed.

There was shouting from the crowd outside the courtroom, but it wasn't aimed at the judges. It was meant for the people in the courtroom, the opposite camp. The commotion intensified. There was more shouting, a scuffle broke out, and soon a brawl. Police officers ran about, striking out with their batons and ordering everyone to calm down. But the crowd was seething. A free-for-all erupted outside the courthouse.

Those images played over and over on TV. No one cared about the land dispute anymore. Not many people knew that

Sanjaya, the ethnic Chinese man who'd brought the case to court, had refused to accept the ruling. He would take the matter to a higher court.

A week later, Arimbi was busy transcribing a stack of documents that had piled up on her desk. She hadn't been assigned to any new cases. She still hadn't gotten to Judge Dewabrata's ruling on the dispute over Maemunah's land. She was working according to the priorities set by Mrs. Danti.

It was another dreary Saturday afternoon, and Arimbi was curled up on her bed. She wanted to sleep through the sweltering day, ignoring the sweat pouring down her neck and her forehead. She was wearing a tank top and shorts, but they weren't helping at all to keep her cool.

There was a knock at the door. Arimbi ignored it. It was probably next door, she thought. She never had visitors. The only person who came regularly was the guy who delivered the water gallons twice a week, and then only after Arimbi called him. If there really was someone knocking on her door now, she thought, it was doubtless someone who'd got the wrong address.

There was another knock, louder this time, and followed by a man's voice hallooing. Arimbi stayed where she was. The sound soon began to irk her, though. She got up and put on a T-shirt over her tank top. It had a *barong*⁶ design – a gift from Mrs. Danti after a visit to Bali. The T-shirt fell below the hem of her shorts.

There were three men at her door. Two of them wore light blue uniforms, the kind that the office gofers in the building next to the courthouse wore. Arimbi then realized that it was

⁶ A mythical lion-like beast

the uniform of the supermarket where she did her monthly shopping.

"Ms. Arimbi, right?" asked the man who was dressed differently from the other two. His uniform was black, similar to the suits that rich people's drivers or assistants wore.

Arimbi nodded. "What is it?"

The man held out his hand in greeting. "I'm Mrs. Susanah's assistant."

"Mrs. Susanah? Who's Mrs. Susanah?" Arimbi was at a complete loss. She didn't know anyone named Susanah. In fact, she didn't know all that many people. She certainly can't have forgotten if she did know a Susanah.

"Mrs. Susanah Setiawan. From the court..." the man said, then stopped as he waited for Arimbi to respond. She still couldn't remember.

"The woman who won the ruling in the Jagakarsa land dispute last week," he went on.

"Ohhhh..." Arimbi remembered now; the woman with the hair bun and the heavy makeup like Mrs. Danti. But Arimbi didn't understand. They'd never met. Arimbi didn't know what to say.

"Here's a little something from Mrs. Susanah," the man said, pointing to a large cardboard box on the ground in front of the two supermarket workers.

"A little something...?"

"Yes, a gift of sorts. Just a token of appreciation..."

"Huh?" Arimbi was lost now.

"A token of thanks from Mrs. Susanah for helping her in her affairs. Everyone else has already gotten theirs. That just leaves you."

Arimbi looked at the box. Printed in large type were the

letters "LG". A smile formed on her lips. It was an air conditioner. An AC. How fortuitous, she thought, that just as she was sweltering in the heat, here was someone giving her an AC. How could Arimbi afford to buy an AC herself when she couldn't save anything from her own salary of two and a half million a month?

"Just a moment."

Arimbi went back inside and picked up her mobile phone that was next to her bed. She sent a text message to Mrs. Danti. She didn't want to do anything without Mrs. Danti's say-so. She was just a lowly clerk who had to do as her superior said, she thought.

Soon a message came in. It was from Mrs. Danti. "That's called luck, Mbi. Congratulations, you have an AC now. ☺"

Arimbi smiled. She replied briefly, "Thanks, ma'am."

The two supermarket workers installed the air conditioner above her window, just over her bed. When it was done, they asked Arimbi to turn it on and feel the difference.

"Wow...." Arimbi grinned. She worked in an air-conditioned room every day. But having an air conditioner in her tiny rented house in this narrow alley made the cool and crispness feel all that more different. It was a thousand times cooler and crisper and thousands of times more comfortable.

Arimbi felt the flow of cold air hit her arms and work their way across her whole body, creating a fresh sensation that made her feel as if she was bathing beneath a waterfall back in her home village. She felt lighter, and the cramped room felt four times bigger and cleaner. Ah, why did she never feel this when she was at work, she thought.

"Hmmm... I guess everything's better when it's your own," she murmured to herself, then smiled.

Arimbi set the AC at 17 degrees Celsius, then burrowed beneath the thick quilt that she hadn't used in ages. She slept like a log for the rest of the day.

By the end of November, it wasn't as hot in Jakarta as before. Arimbi left the AC in her room off more often. The crisp air after the rain was enough to keep her room cool. Besides, she enjoyed leaving the small window open when she was home. She liked to feel the breeze and the droplets of rain that often wet her sheets. Arimbi enjoyed that sort of thing.

Work had eased up this week. Hearings had been put on hold temporarily. Mrs. Danti hadn't marked any rulings for transcribing as "urgent". Arimbi worked on whatever she wanted, typing only to fill in the time. She took her time. She had a habit of doing this until Mrs. Danti asked to have one of the rulings, when she would switch gears and transcribe away like crazy to get the job done.

The office became deserted. Many of the clerks were off on vacation, traveling back to their hometowns. Anisa had been gone since the week before. "Since there's no work to do right

now," she'd said. She hadn't actually gone anywhere, but was staying at home and looking after her child now that the nanny had left for her own hometown. Anisa had sent Arimbi a text message earlier that morning to see if Mrs. Danti had been asking about her. Arimbi replied that she hadn't, that in fact Mrs. Danti hadn't been to the office since the beginning of the week. She'd only stepped in for a moment to call Arimbi outside. "Happy holidays," Mrs. Danti had said. She told Arimbi about her planned holiday in Singapore with her three children. Mrs. Danti didn't celebrate Eid-ul-Fitr.

It wasn't Arimbi's choice to remain in town while everyone else was off doing their own thing. There was only one ticket left for the bus back to her hometown, and that was for the night before the big holiday. It happened to her every year, for four years now. She'd waited in line at the ticket office at the bus terminal from early in the morning on the very first day of the fasting month. There were thirty days to go until the holiday, yet the ticket staff always said all the tickets were sold out. Over the next several days, Arimbi stopped by the bus terminal before going to work in the hope of finding someone with a ticket to sell, or on the off-chance that more buses had been deployed.

In the third week of the fasting month, when the bus terminal was beginning to get busy, someone came up to Arimbi and offered her a ticket home at three times the regular price. Arimbi was desperate, so she quickly paid for it before anyone else could buy it. That's what happened every year: She lined up early, then ended up waiting for someone to change their mind and sell her their ticket, which she always bought at triple the price.

Next year she'd do things differently, she told herself. The

day before, after buying the ticket from the scalper at the terminal, she'd met a colleague from the courthouse. He was a fellow clerk, but in the administrative department. They weren't close, but they knew each other. Arimbi had gone to his room a few times to submit attendance reports. They'd occasionally also sat on the same bench at lunch. His name was Hari.

"Hey, Mbi, are you buying a ticket too?" he asked.

"Yes, I've just got it," Arimbi held up the ticket. "Right on the eve of the holiday. Three hundred and fifty thousand."

"That's really expensive. Where are you going anyway?"

"Ponorogo."

"Oh, I'm going to Kediri and it's two hundred thousand. Normally it's a hundred and fifty thousand. But you know holiday prices."

"What?! Where did you buy it from?"

"From that ticket booth over there." Hari pulled the ticket from his trouser pocket. Arimbi grabbed it and studied the figure of 200,000 printed on it. The departure time was later that evening.

"How did you manage to get it? I waited in line a month ago and they were sold out."

Hari laughed. "If you'd lined up a year ago you'd still have missed out." He laughed again. "What's the use of wearing a uniform if you're going to end up buying from a scalper anyway?"

Arimbi decided she would try Hari's method the next time around. Not just for Eid-ul-Fitr, but for any occasion when she needed a ticket. Without wasting any time, she would go straight up to the ticket booth, knock on the door and go up to the person manning the counter. She would be wearing her uniform and she would show her office ID, a small card the

size of the national ID card. There were always tickets for court officials, Hari told her.

The days leading up to the trip home were hardly happy ones; instead, they tended to be a series of inconveniences. For Arimbi, going back was more an obligation than a fond homecoming. She calculated how much money she had in her savings, plus the rest of her previous month's salary and her holiday bonus. Four million in all. And Arimbi knew that by the time she returned to Jakarta after the holiday, there would be none left.

Two days before her departure, Arimbi made a trip to a bargain shopping center. She had to jostle amid the crowd to pick out clothes to take back to her village. This was the only thing she liked about Jakarta: clothes here were cheap.

She bought an Islamic dress for her mother for forty thousand rupiah. For her father, she chose a long-sleeved white shirt for twenty-five thousand. She also bought a score of batik shirts for three hundred thousand. It was for her mother, who wanted to hand them out to relatives and neighbors as mementoes from Jakarta. For herself, Arimbi bought a long, low-cut, light brown blouse with gold embroidery. That kind of top was in fashion on all the TV shows lately. It cost thirty-five thousand.

On the morning of her trip, Arimbi went to the supermarket where she did her usual monthly shopping. Anyone coming home from a distant place, and especially from the capital, was expected to bring back snacks. The neighbors would visit her parents' house and realize that she was back. They would look her in the face, ask how she was, and of course expect to be offered a taste of the snacks from

Jakarta. Arimbi bought five kilograms of *dodol*¹ and two dozen cheap donuts.

People were setting off for the mosque by the time Arimbi got off the bus at a crossroads. Her parents' house was five hundred steps from the crossroads. Arimbi greeted everyone she met along the way, most of whom were her parents' age. They all remembered her, while Arimbi had forgotten most of their names.

Time had changed everything. Even though she went back home every year, she couldn't keep track of all the little changes that took place. And when all the small things added up, changing everything she'd once seen and remembered, Arimbi realized that nothing was the same. Mr. Mardi, the next-door neighbor, in her mind had a pot belly and a manly stride; now he was rail thin and walked hunched over. He was suffering from diabetes.

Mariani, Arimbi's friend from grade school, was several months' pregnant with her fourth child. It occurred to Arimbi that each time she'd been back home, Mariani was always pregnant. Her first child, a son, was four years old. The moment he saw Arimbi coming he ran straight over to her parents' house. Arimbi gave him five sticks of *dodol* and a five-thousand-rupiah note.

This year there was no Mr. Lanjar or Aunt Kiyem. Both of them lived across from Arimbi's parents' house and were now dead. Mr. Lanjar was hit by a truck while on his motorbike on his way home from the fields. It was said that he was driving erratically because he had overloaded his motorbike with freshly cut grass that he was bringing back to feed his cows. As

¹ A kind of taffy made with palm sugar

his motorbike wobbled and he tried to regain control, he veered into oncoming traffic and was hit by a truck going at high speed. Mr. Lanjar died on the spot. His motorbike was totaled and the grass was strewn all over the road.

Aunt Kiyem died without warning. She took a nap one afternoon and never woke up. Just a few hours earlier she'd been sweeping her yard and talking with Arimbi's mother. Aunt Kiyem didn't suffer from any serious illness; once in a while her gout would play up. Arimbi used to have lunch at her house. She lived alone, no children or husband. That was why she liked feeding the neighbors' children. Once in a while, after the corn harvest, she would hand out pocket money to the children. Arimbi, who lived closest to her, always got the biggest share.

On her first day back at home, the visitors didn't stop coming from morning until night. Arimbi gave money to all the children. Her mother decided who would get snacks and who would get a batik shirt. The visitors asked what life was like in Jakarta. Some of them complimented everything about Arimbi. They said her figure was sensuous, her complexion fair, and her clothes beautiful. "It really is something else being a city person, isn't it?" they would all say.

Arimbi was laconic in her responses. She answered everything with a "Yes" or a "Thank you". It was her parents who did most of the talking. They retold all the stories she'd told them, with lots of embellishments. Not everything they said was true, but Arimbi let them be. When her parents were the center of the conversation like this, Arimbi would tiptoe off to her room and catch up on the sleep she'd missed out on during the bus ride from Jakarta.

Her parents only stopped talking when someone asked,

"When is she getting married?" They were silent for a long time, then answered in a gentle tone, "Pray for her that she finds a soul mate quickly."

The same question was also often posed to Arimbi directly. Her response each time was to smile and say, "Haha... I haven't thought about it yet."

The person asking would then respond with advice: "As a woman you shouldn't forget your calling. What good is having money if you don't have any children?"

Mariani had her own way of asking. "You're so busy looking for money, when do you have time to find a man?" she asked.

To her, Arimbi had no issue answering as she pleased. "I'd rather be looking for money than getting pregnant every year."

Mariani didn't take any offense at that; instead, she burst out laughing, and Arimbi laughed too. They were laughing at their own lives.

The hardest thing for Arimbi was when her parents started talking to her in earnest. Before, this kind of talk would be full of advice; reminders for Arimbi to always know her place, to live respectably. But since three years ago, her parents had taken to reminding Arimbi to not forget her duty. No matter how high a woman rose, they said, it would mean nothing if she was alone.

"Don't end up an old maid, child," her mother said.

"But I'm not even old, Mother," Arimbi said in a high tone. She was annoyed at having to listen to all this advice that never ceased.

"Hush! Anywhere you go, women of your age already have three children. Look at Mariani; she's pregnant with her fourth."

"Mother! First you say I have to be an official so I can make my own money. And now that I'm an official you're saying I have to be like Mariani."

"Hey now, no one's saying you have to be like Mariani. I'm just saying take a look at her. She's already married, she's got children, and now she's pregnant again. What's so bad about being an official and also getting married, having a husband and children?"

"If there's someone to marry... but there isn't!"

"Mbi!" her father snapped. "Don't be insolent. We just want you to be happy. To be an official and have lots of money—there's no point if you end up an old maid!"

He spoke with conviction. His words sealed off the whole issue. He was commanding her, using his authority and his power as a father and the only man in the house. It had always been like that. Arimbi's father seldom spoke, and rarely asked questions. But when he did speak, Arimbi's mother could only agree and affirm. And that was what Arimbi used to do as well. But how could she submit this time if she didn't even have anyone to marry?

That dinnertime wasn't the only time they raised the matter. They made full use of Arimbi being back home to bring up the same point at every chance they got; the next morning when Arimbi was helping her mother prepare *pecel*², her mother said, "You shouldn't be picky as a woman."

Arimbi couldn't be bothered to answer, so she said nothing. She knew they would harp on about it the whole time she was there. There was no use responding, nor was there any point

² A dish of mixed vegetables

getting angry about it. Arimbi was an only child, and as a child she had to obey her parents.

In the afternoon, as she was lying back in the living room watching TV, her father came in with a cup of coffee. He usually drank his coffee in the back yard while feeding the chickens. Arimbi could only draw a deep breath, bracing once again to be the patient listener.

"You need to be more pious, Mbi!" he began. Arimbi said nothing as she stared ahead of her at the TV. Her father poured some coffee into a saucer, blew on it, then took a sip.

"You need to pray more. Ask for a soul mate," he went on. "I'm getting old, Mbi. Don't let me die without a son-in-law."

"Oh, stop it with this talk about dying," Arimbi said quickly. His last remark had undone her patience.

But his words had their effect, making her feel guilty and wanting to give up. Arimbi looked over at him. His hair was all white, his skin creased, his body scrawny, a hand-rolled cigarette always wedged between his fingers.

He had changed a lot. The signs of old age were all over him. He'd never had any serious illness before, but lately he'd begun coughing and complaining about sudden chest pains. Arimbi and her mother always said it was the cigarettes. But the moment he'd recovered from the coughing and the pains, he would say, "Who says it's because of the cigarettes? Don't believe the doctor."

Arimbi suddenly imagined what it would be like if her father died. She would never again see this man who had raised her. He would be gone forever, following in the steps of Mr. Lanjar and Aunt Kiyem. Arimbi would have the most to regret because she would have failed to give him what he most wanted before he died. All he wanted was for her to get

married; to host a wedding reception for his one and only child.

Arimbi left the house that evening, heading for the edge of the rice field. She wanted to get some fresh air and avoid her parents' nagging. She followed a narrow path two houses down the street. The path was flanked by rice fields. At this time of the year the plants were still only calf-high and a deep green. At the end of the path, the rice fields on the left and the right met.

When she was little Arimbi often played along this path. She and her friends would ride their bicycles or chase one another here. In the rainy season, they would jump into the creek at the far end of the fields. It was there that Arimbi learned to swim. She wondered if she could still do it; the last time she'd swum was in college.

Arimbi plucked a teak leaf and placed it on the ground to sit on. She turned to the west, watching the sky turn red by increments. A flock of birds appeared like black spots against the evening sun. Arimbi could make out the silhouette of someone cycling toward her. The distant figure grew bigger and clearer. It was a man on sturdy steel bicycle, a stack of cut grass trussed up behind his saddle. In his left hand he clutched a sickle.

When he came up to Arimbi he stopped. It was only then that Arimbi recognized him.

"Narno," she exclaimed. They had gone to grade school and middle school together.

"I didn't recognize you when I saw you, Mbi. I heard you're doing good these days," Narno said as he leaned his bicycle up against the teak tree.

"What's so good about it?" Arimbi said. She realized that

she barely recognized him. Narno had changed a lot. His once-fair skin was now deeply tanned. He looked older than his age. When they shook hands, Arimbi noticed how the muscles bulged in his arm, and felt how coarse and furrowed his palm. He was dressed in a thin T-shirt with a picture of a district chief candidate. It probably used to be a white T-shirt, but now it was the rusty color of the water in the creek.

The Narno standing before her was a completely different person from the Narno that Arimbi remembered. They'd last met when Arimbi had come home three years ago. Back then Narno was working in Surabaya, in a shoe factory. He'd told her he was planning to marry a woman he'd met there. Arimbi hadn't seen him since. When she'd returned to the village the following years he wasn't there; similarly, she was never there when he came back.

They used to share a bench in class sometimes when they were in grade school. The teachers somehow liked to pair them off like that. They always mixed them up, a boy and a girl to each bench. That led to the other children teasing Arimbi and Narno, saying they were going steady. Arimbi and Narno were so ashamed that they didn't dare greet one another whenever they met. They only spoke when they were alone together.

They found themselves in the same class again in middle school. One day Narno slipped Arimbi a note in which he said he liked her and wanted to be her boyfriend. Arimbi didn't reply. She didn't want to be Narno's girlfriend. Since then they didn't speak to one another again. Narno, who was shy by nature, always tried to avoid her. And Arimbi, who felt bad about the whole thing, felt awkward about going up to speak to him.

After middle school, Narno went to vocational school while

Arimbi continued on to high school. They rarely met, and when they did it was in passing on the street. But they spoke to each other again, perhaps because they had grown up. Narno was no longer shy, and Arimbi no longer felt awkward. Narno never gave her any more letters. They were truly just friends.

"When do you go back to Jakarta?" Narno asked, waking Arimbi out of her reverie.

"Tomorrow afternoon. And you?"

"Me?" Narno said with a laugh. "I'm here now," he added.

"But weren't you in Surabaya?"

"You mean your mother never told you?"

Arimbi shook her head. Her mother seldom told her about other people these days. Every time they met or Arimbi called, all she wanted to talk about was when Arimbi was getting married.

"I got laid off. I've been back here for a year now," Narno said, still laughing. He pulled a hand-rolled cigarette from his pocket. It was the same kind that Arimbi's father smoked.

"Why were you laid off?"

"They said the company was losing money. A lot of us were affected. Forty workers."

"Was there a severance package?"

"Seven and a half million. I spent it all on home renovations. I figured if I was going to stay with my parents I should spruce the place up a bit."

Once tacked together from boards, the house now had brick walls. The leaky roof had been replaced with new orange tiles, and the dirt floor paved with cheap tiles.

"How about your wife and kids?"

"They're at home. I've got a son, he's two years old. He's going to get a new sibling soon," Narno said proudly.

"Your wife is pregnant?"

"Seven months. She's big now," Narno said as he cupped his hand in front of his belly. Then he quickly asked, "How about you?"

"No one wants me, it seems," Arimbi laughed. She felt much more comfortable answering that question if it was Narno or Mariani asking. It was an easy answer; it wasn't loaded, nor did it carry an anger or shame.

"Hey, don't talk like that. You might regret it!" Narno said in a high tone.

Arimbi tried to steer the conversation to another topic. "So what are you doing now?"

"As you see. I'm a farmer. What I mean is, I farm someone else's field, not my own."

They both fell silent. Narno stared straight ahead of him as he puffed on his cigarette. Who knew what he was looking at? For each drag he took of the cigarette, he blew out a large cloud of smoke. Once in a while he blew a smoke ring.

Arimbi tried to think of how best to ask her next question. There was a lot she still wanted to know. Where was he getting money from? How much did he make as a hired farmhand? Was it enough to live on? How did he and his family eat? But she was afraid that he would be offended. Finally she asked softly, "Have you tried looking for another job in Surabaya?"

"I tried until I was bored," Narno said, laughing. He took another drag of the cigarette, then went on: "After I got laid off, I stayed in Surabaya. I looked everywhere for a job. I applied at all the factories. They weren't hiring."

Arimbi nodded as she listened. She didn't know what to say.

Narno resumed his story: "So rather than stay there doing nothing, and paying rent, I decided to come back home. Even food was expensive there."

"But wasn't your wife working too?"

"Yes, at a cigarette factory. They laid her off when she was four months' pregnant. She was a contract laborer so they could let her go whenever they liked. What factory wants a pregnant worker? It's more of a cost to them."

Arimbi didn't reply. She was at a loss for something to say. Inside, her heart was bursting with pity, while her thoughts dwelled first on how hard Narno had worked for his family, then on how grateful she was that she wasn't in his situation. She wanted to change the subject right away. Besides, Narno seemed to have accepted his lot. He talked without a hint of self-pity or grumbling. It all seemed normal for him. He could still laugh about it while smoking his cigarette.

"Whose field were you working on just now?" Arimbi asked as she tried to change the subject. She also changed her tone, from a serious one full of compassion to a light, casual one.

"The ward chief's. It's his *bengkok*³ land. I'm working on it all the way from the planting to the harvest. He provides the fertilizer and I provide the manpower. I'll get a third of the harvest."

Arimbi nodded. She knew all about this kind of harvest-sharing system. Suddenly she remembered something. "No, you graduated from vocational school, didn't you? Why don't

³ Land owned by a village and allowed to be used by a ward chief while in office, as one of the perks of the job

you try to be a village councilor. All the current ones are getting old."

Narno burst out laughing. He laughed long and hard, while Arimbi looked on in surprise. She didn't think she'd said anything funny. It was true that all the village councilors were old. Most of them had been in the job since Arimbi was in grade school. None of them had studied beyond the sixth grade. The only requirement was to be able to read and write. So of course it would be so much better to bring in a vocational school graduate who was young and fresh. For Narno, being a village councilor would have its own benefits. He wouldn't have to work other people's fields. Instead, he'd get his own *bengkok* land.

"Do you still remember Widodo?" Narno asked.

Arimbi nodded. She remembered. Widodo had gone to grade school with them, and later to vocational school like Narno. His father owned his own rice field, like Arimbi's father. After graduating, he refused to look for a job. Instead, he spent his time roaming the village on the motorbike paid for by the harvest from his father's crop.

"He's a councilor now. He paid forty million," Narno said.

"What...?" Arimbi was incredulous. "So you have to pay forty million to become a councilor?"

Narno nodded.

"Pay whom?"

"The village. For its coffers."

"Whose rule is that?" Arimbi still didn't believe it.

"The village's rule."

"So whoever can afford to pay can become a village councilor?" She refused to believe it.

"Uh-huh... but of course not everyone can afford to pay," Narno said. His voice was lifeless.

* * *

It was Arimbi's last night at her parents' home. Her mother had slaughtered a chicken and grilled it for dinner. The three of them sat on the woven mat in front of the TV and ate together. Arimbi had braced herself for the lecture to come. Just one more night, she told herself.

But halfway into the meal and her parent's hadn't said anything. Instead, they were riveted by the slapstick variety show on TV. They laughed at every punchline and funny move, once in a while commenting on what they'd just seen.

"The ward chief wants to see you, Mbi," Arimbi's father suddenly said as the TV show broke for commercials.

"What for?"

"He says he needs something. He'll be along soon enough. He said he'd be here at eight."

Arimbi looked at the clock. It was still seven-thirty. She helped her mother clear the dishes.

"What is it that the ward chief wants, Mother?" she asked when they were in the kitchen.

"He wants to ask you a few questions. His son wants to be an official like you."

Arimbi nodded knowingly. The ward chief's son was a university graduate. Perhaps he wanted to know what it was like to work in Jakarta. Arimbi felt calmer. All that mattered was that her father and mother didn't harangue her tonight about getting married.

It was just before eight when they heard the sound of a car

pulling up outside the house. It had to be the ward chief. Only three people in the village had a car: The ward chief; Mr. Gatot, the high school principal; and Mr. Dikin, who owned a one-hectare orange grove.

Arimbi, her parents and the ward chief sat and talked in the front room. Arimbi's mother brought out four cups of coffee and a jar of crackers. The ward chief started by regaling them with the details of an event that took place earlier that day at the subdistrict office. He said he'd met the district chief there. They'd shook hands and took a photo together.

Once he was done telling the story, the ward chief asked Arimbi, "Where in Jakarta do you live?"

"In the Menteng area, sir."

"Wow, near Suharto's house, huh?"

Arimbi laughed. "No, sir. The Menteng I'm in is the rundown one, called Menteng Atas. Suharto's place is in the actual Menteng."

Everyone laughed at Arimbi's explanation. When the laughter had died down, the ward chief resumed talking in a serious tone.

"You work in a court, is that right?"

Arimbi nodded.

The ward chief went on: "My youngest son just graduated from university. He's got a law degree. He says he wants to be like you and work in a court."

"Oh... Well, they usually recruit in June. You should tell him to register then and take the test."

"Well, that's a given. But what's not a given is whether he'll be accepted or not."

Arimbi was confused. She didn't know what the ward chief was talking about. The room was silent for a moment.

"What I mean is, I'm asking for your help to find a way."

Arimbi was more puzzled than ever. She got her job without having to "find a way". She just did the test and got accepted. Granted, she was just a clerk, but when she got accepted everyone said she was lucky. Her college friends said she'd made it not because of her brains but because of her luck. Arimbi had to admit that she wasn't as clever as some of her friends. Then there were the neighbors, who wondered how she got into the civil service without knowing anyone on the inside. Her parents said it was because of her piety. "What's important is to be lucky rather than clever," her father had said over and over.

Arimbi certainly felt that she owed everything she had to luck. And luck was a function of fate. Yet here was the ward chief asking for her to "find a way".

"I've prepared a hundred million. You can take it any time you want. But I just want my son to be a court official."

"Oh my, I don't understand that kind of thing, chief. I'm just a regular worker."

"Yes, but you must know someone there. You must have a superior, surely? It'd be even better if you knew a judge, so that my son can be a judge. But even if he's just an official like you that's OK too."

Arimbi didn't say anything. The truth was that she didn't really know anyone at the court apart from her fellow clerks and Mrs. Danti. A hundred million? Arimbi had heard that nearly all the officials at the court had gotten their jobs through bribery or through a family connection. But she never really believed it. She, for one, got in without paying anything.

"There's no harm in trying, Mbi. Just try," her father coaxed her.

"Yes, please try. My first child got in thanks to someone I know in the administrative department. So it can be done."

"Where does she work?" Arimbi asked.

"At the district government. She's been there a year. I paid fifty million. She only finished high school. They say it costs more for university graduates. That's why I've prepared a hundred million this time."

The ward chief told them more about his daughter. She'd been placed in the administrative department of the district development board. "The work is easy. She leaves home at eight o'clock and comes back at two. It's put her mother at ease."

The person who had "found a way" for her was an official whom the ward chief had met during an event at the district chief's office. He was the head of the district government's administrative department. The ward chief had long been on the lookout for new acquaintances who could get his daughter, unemployed for two years, into the civil service. Every time he met a district government official, he struck up a conversation to find out their position. So as soon as he knew he was talking to the head of the administrative department, he asked for the official's home address and went there the very next day.

"I got it cheap! There were others who were prepared to pay up to a hundred million but didn't get in."

"Why don't you get your son into the district government then, chief?" Arimbi asked.

"That's what I wanted. But he doesn't. He says he wants to work in a court. So be it. My job as a parent is just to find a way and prepare the money."

"But working in Jakarta won't be easy, you know, sir," Arimbi said, trying to get the ward chief to change his mind

"That's alright. He's a man. Besides, it'll be worth it. If he's working in a court, especially in Jakarta, the money's bound to be pouring in."

"Ah, says who, chief? Civil servants everywhere get paid the same."

"You've been trying to play it down this whole time. Just in Ponorogo there's a court official who has a house across from the hospital; a big house. And three cars. Imagine what it's like for those in Jakarta."

Arimbi smiled. What if the ward chief knew that in Jakarta she lived in a tiny rented house in a narrow alley, she thought. And forget about buying a car; she could barely make her paycheck last a month.

"Arimbi's new so she's not at that stage yet," her father said. There was a hint of pride and high expectation in his words.

"Well, of course, everything needs time. What matters is that we're in the right place. You'll definitely get your cut," the ward chief said as he flashed a smile at Arimbi.

Arimbi smiled back at him. Suddenly she thought of the new air conditioner in her room.

It was the first day back after the holidays, and Mrs. Danti had placed a small note on Arimbi's desk listing all the cases whose rulings needed to be typed up before the end of the week. Arimbi frowned as she read it. She had just five days to transcribe and collate five rulings and submit them to Mrs. Danti.

She began sifting through the stack of files on her desk, reading the labels on each one. She found four of the needed folders easily enough. They were cases that had concluded just recently, including the land dispute won by Susanah Setiawan. Arimbi decided she would work on that one first.

But she still couldn't find the file for the fifth case. She reread all the folders again, just in case she'd overlooked it or it was wedged inside another folder. She still couldn't find it. She checked yet again, this time putting each folder at the other end of her desk after reading the label. There were 26

folders in the stack, all of them cases that had concluded in 2004.

Suddenly Arimbi remembered something and quickly bent down to look under her desk. Sure enough, there was a box full of papers there. These related to cases that ended the year before, and the year before that. Arimbi pulled the box out from underneath her desk and lifted out the folders. Then one by one she checked the labels, shoving them back into the box after determining they weren't what she was looking for.

Some of the documents were folded over, concealing the writing. Others were torn near the corners. It can't have been termites. Perhaps they were already that way when she got them. In some of the folders, the handwritten rulings were beginning to fade. It seemed the judges didn't use long-lasting ink. It was bad enough that their scrawl was barely legible; now it was also barely visible.

Arimbi wondered how so many case had piled up like that. Didn't the parties in each case need an official copy of the ruling? Why hadn't Mrs. Danti asked her to type them up after all this time? And why did a ruling that had only just recently concluded need to be typed up immediately?

"Hah! Found you!" Arimbi exclaimed happily. She had found the case file she was looking for among the stack of musty smelling papers. The ruling dated back to January 2003, nearly two years ago. It was an assault case.

"An old case, Mbi?" Anisa asked. They sat at desks facing each other, so each could see what the other was doing.

"Yes. January 2003; assault."

"Oh... Last month I had to type up a case file from four years ago. It was a murder. Good thing the termites hadn't gotten to it yet," Anisa said in an annoyed tone. She'd worked

at the court longer than Arimbi had. So while Arimbi had a box full of old case files under her desk, Anisa had three plastic containers of them behind her chair.

"How come no one comes asking for these old files?" Arimbi asked.

"I guess they don't need them."

"In that case we might as well throw them away," Arimbi said, kicking the box at her feet.

"But what if someone comes asking?"

"Then it's their own fault for not asking earlier."

"Perhaps they didn't need it back then. What if they only need it now, and they're willing to pay for it?"

"And what if they refuse to pay for it?"

"Then we ignore them. Someone's bound to come asking after a while. Usually a loooong while."

Arimbi didn't say anything. She quickly put the rest of the folders back into the box and pushed it back under her desk. She didn't think about anything but getting the documents transcribed. She got to work typing on her keyboard, starting with the Susanah Setiawan land dispute. She smiled for a moment as she typed out the full name of the case, remembering the AC she had earned out of it.

During lunch in the canteen, Arimbi told her little secret to Anisa. Transcribing the ruling had made her want to tell someone about the AC, after she'd kept the incident to herself for so long. She had always hesitated and felt ashamed about bringing up the subject, afraid that she would be misunderstood or perceived as dishonest. But this afternoon, the desire to talk about it swept over her, and Arimbi felt she should share the story, in the same way she discussed her

parents or Anisa talked about her husband. She spoke softly, half-whispering, her mouth near Anisa's ear.

"An AC? When I worked here as long as you, all I got was a gas stove," Anisa said with a laugh.

Arimbi glared at her and quickly put her finger to her lips. "Shhhhh!"

"Oops!" Anisa quickly shut her mouth, then whispered, "I guess everything's gone up a notch these days, including the cut." She giggled with her left hand clamped over her mouth.

Arimbi was surprised. She'd imagined that Anisa would have chastised her and told her to return the AC right away.

"You mean you usually get things like that?"

"Before. Now I just ask for it in the readies."

Arimbi raised her eyebrow. She still didn't get it.

"If it's household goods like those, I've already got them all at home," Anisa went on, oblivious to Arimbi's confusion.

"Who do you ask?"

"Mrs. Danti, of course. Sometimes I ask the lawyers directly. I know a lot of them already."

Arimbi was even more perplexed and incredulous. Anisa had told her lots of things before, but nothing like this. Arimbi knew that Anisa was acquainted with the lawyers and prosecutors; she gossiped about them often enough, especially about their extramarital affairs. She'd seen Anisa talking with them on several occasions; in the parking lot; near the front entrance; in the canteen. Once in a while they would also come into the office and Anisa would take them outside.

"You mean it's OK to accept it?"

"Of course it's OK if even the boss does it. Ask anyone and they'll tell you they also accept it."

"I've been working here four years; how come I never heard of this?"

"It's because you're dumb!" Anisa gave Arimbi a gentle shove in the head. They both laughed. Then Anisa whispered, "Where did you think I got the money to buy a car from? Certainly not from my salary."

"From your husband."

Anisa burst out laughing. She laughed long and hard. "My husband's a civil servant too, missy! His salary is no different from mine. It's not even enough to eat!"

Arimbi had never met Anisa's husband. She'd only seen pictures of him on Anisa's mobile phone and computer. In the pictures they were always traveling somewhere with their child. There was a picture of the husband holding the child in a swimming pool. Anisa said it was taken in Bandung, at a hotel they stayed at near the Dago area. There was also a picture of the child sitting on sand and crying. She said they were at Ancol at the time and had just eaten at a seafood restaurant. Another picture showed the three of them standing in front of an airplane. It was from the Eid-ul-Fitr holiday the year before, when they flew to Anisa's hometown of Makassar.

Arimbi knew Anisa's husband was a civil servant. But she always assumed he had a high-ranking post with all kinds of perks. They bought a car last year, a Toyota Avanza, brand new from the dealer. Anisa said they'd bought it on credit. But she would never have been able to pay the monthly installments with her salary alone, which can't have been more than five hundred thousand rupiah more than Arimbi's salary.

"So you're actually allowed to ask for money from the lawyers?" Arimbi still didn't believe it.

"Well, if you aren't, then there's no point typing up the rulings," Anisa said teasingly.

"But we type the rulings based on what Mrs. Danti says."

"Yeeees... But we're the ones who do the typing. What are they going to do if we refuse to type? That's why you need to get acquainted with them. When Mrs. Danti tells you which ruling to transcribe, you've got to go find the lawyer dealing with that case!"

That night, Arimbi couldn't stop thinking about what Anisa had said. No wonder Anisa had everything, she thought to herself. Arimbi did a mental inventory: House, car—two cars, in fact—a nice mobile phone, a nice watch, shoes and bags of all kinds, frequent plane trips. Arimbi thought of Mrs. Danti and all that she had. Her car was better than Anisa's. It was a red Honda Jazz. Her house was probably better too. And Mrs. Danti didn't vacation in Bandung; she went to Singapore. That was probably all thanks to the cut that she got from the lawyers, Arimbi thought.

She got up from her bed and picked up the remote control next to the TV. It had rained every night for the past week, but not tonight. Some nights the roof leaked, and drops of water would hit Arimbi's face and legs. In the mornings she would wake up to find her room flooded. The roof was full of leaks. Arimbi imagined what it would be like to have a little extra money to afford a nicer place; or better yet, rent a small house out in the suburbs, in Depok or Bekasi.

The room was cold. Arimbi curled up beneath her thick quilt. She thought she saw flashes of light play on her wall. But she'd already turned off the lights, and she couldn't make out what it was. Perhaps just the shadow from the curtain, she thought. She ignored it and shut her eyes. But the light

continued moving, faster now, and finally flashed in Arimbi's face. She threw open the curtain to see where it was coming from.

"Oh my God!" she shrieked.

A fire was blazing just five houses down from where she was. Columns of thick, black smoke rose up into the night air. Arimbi rushed outside and toward the scene of the fire, where a crowd had already gathered. Men were running about, fetching buckets and unrolling a hose pipe. There was shouting and screaming, and calls for help. There was also the sound of crying. The electricity went out along the alley.

There was the sound of a fire truck's siren, faint at first, but growing louder. Soon a group of men in orange uniforms appeared at the mouth of the alley. They ran toward the fire pulling a thick hose attached to their fire truck, which was too wide to go into the alley. They hit a snag: the hose only extended as far as Arimbi's house. It couldn't go any further.

Everyone began panicking. The firefighters couldn't use their hose. At that distance it was pointless. They ran back up to their truck and came back with another hose. They connected the two hoses. It seemed to take an eternity. The fire grew bigger. It was fast and relentless. There was more shouting, more crying.

The fire was finally put out by daybreak. The whole alley smelled singed. Black smoke still filled the air. As the day got brighter, the remains of the night's carnage became apparent. Three houses were razed. There was nothing left in their place but ash, rubble and bits of metal. One of them was the home of Mr. Ahmad, from whom Arimbi rented her own house. The two others were also owned by Mr. Ahmad and which he rented out to boarders. The buildings were destroyed.

Arimbi suddenly felt dizzy. In her mind she could still see the fire, and its flame blinded her. Her ears rang with all the shouting and crying. She shuffled slowly back to her house, supporting herself against the walls along the alley. She realized she hadn't slept all night.

She woke up at seven in a panic. Her eyes had been shut for an hour, but her mind was jumping all over the place, reminding her that she had work to finish and waking her spent body. A knock on the door forced her out of bed and she staggered to answer it. Mr. Ahmad was standing outside with his wife and two daughters. Arimbi's mind was a whirl of thoughts. There was no need for small talk. She opened the door wide for Mr. Ahmad and his family to come inside.

Mr. Ahmad was the only one composed enough to speak. His wife sat silent with a blank stare in her reddened eyes. The girls, both still in grade school, were crying. Their father told them to stop, and they lowered their sound, crying in sniffles.

Arimbi made hot tea for everyone and brought out the bread and cookies she kept in the house. She regretted not having any rice or eggs. She didn't even have any instant noodles. They certainly have not had anything to eat since the night before.

"Miss..." Mr. Ahmad said. "Don't put yourself out."

"It's nothing, sir," Arimbi said. She didn't know what else to say. After putting the cups of tea on the table, she stood silently by the door. She couldn't sit because there was no place left. And if she went into her room it would be rude. She couldn't stay and talk, either, because she had to bathe and leave for work right away. And her head still ached after the sleepless night.

"It's like this, miss..." Mr. Ahmad said hesitantly. His voice

was heavy. "We want to stay here. You know yourself..." He broke off again, unable to finish the sentence. Even so, Arimbi already knew what he meant. This was their house. Of course they could stay here, especially after their own home got burned down. This rented house was the only thing Mr. Ahmad had left.

"About the rest of this month's rent, I'll try to give it back as soon as possible."

"It's no problem, sir. It's your house."

Arimbi felt that was the only proper thing to say to someone who had lost three houses and all his belongings. She paid three hundred thousand rupiah a month in rent. Her last payment was just a week ago. She should have had three weeks left to stay there.

"I'll look for another place to stay. Hopefully I'll be able to move out this evening or tomorrow."

Arimbi found a room to rent, with money borrowed from Anisa, in a house not far from the courthouse. It cost seven hundred and fifty thousand a month—more than twice what she'd been paying for the house she'd lived in for the past four years.

She now lived under a shared roof; running into other boarders whenever she went down from her room on the second floor; taking turns using the clothesline; saying hi whenever she arrived at the front gate with one of the others at night.

Despite the higher price, her new room was a third the size of her old rented house, which had a living room and a kitchen. This room was only just large enough for a bed, a television set and a wardrobe. Apart from her AC, Arimbi had left everything for Mr. Ahmad and his family: the stove, pans, a

few plates that she got for free whenever she bought detergent, and a set of cheap plastic chairs.

The house in which she now lived was large, two stories high, with a big yard. It was grand and elegant, built in the style of rich people's homes in movies from the 1980s. There were six rooms on the second floor and four on the first. Each room had an en suite bathroom.

But the grandness and elegance was only on the outside. None of the rooms gave that impression, especially to anyone who'd been inside with the door shut and looked up at the ceiling and realized that it was here, in this space of four meters by three, that they would spend the rest of their life. Nothing about this place was any better than the shabby house Arimbi had rented, apart from the fresh coat of paint, the shiny toilet that didn't have a permanent yellow stain, and of course its location closer to her workplace. From the courthouse, Arimbi just had to make a single trip on a minibus, then walked the short distance from the main road to the house.

The rooms were cramped and expensive, but all of them were occupied. The one Arimbi was in had just been vacated a week earlier. As was typical, as soon as the boarder left, the caretaker had the walls painted and the bathroom cleaned. It was also the caretaker who collected the rent. The house's owner never showed up. The first time Arimbi was there, the caretaker told her that the owner was a top government official. Arimbi didn't really care, but asked by way of small talk who he was. The caretaker replied that everyone knew of him. Arimbi didn't press the issue; she was only making small talk, after all.

Moving from the cramped alley to the big house changed

very little for Arimbi. She woke up at the same time, went to work and came home as usual. She encountered and occasionally smiled at the other boarders, but never spoke to them. Living closer to work didn't allow her to sleep in an extra two hours; it just meant she got to work earlier. She became the first one to arrive at the building every day, where she would pass by the janitor carrying a mop and a bucket of water, and reply to the greeting from the security guard whose hair was still tousled from sleep. By coming to work early, she was able to finish transcribing all the rulings that Mrs. Danti wanted by the end of the week.

"Is everything done, Mbi?"

"Yes, ma'am. I've made four copies of each."

"OK, it's all settled, then! Your docket's still empty, isn't it, Mbi? You don't have another hearing to attend until the new year," Mrs. Danti said.

"Oh... So what would you like me to type up for next week, ma'am?" Arimbi wasn't asking because she particularly wanted to work, but because she didn't want to be lumbered again with a stack of work that had to be done at short notice.

"There's nothing yet. Just relax! I'll be on leave next week, celebrating Christmas in Manado. I'll be back after the New Year," Mrs. Danti said as she put her mobile phone and her powder compact into her dark red leather bag. She stood up and slung the bag over her right shoulder, then picked up the transcribed rulings in her left hand. "I'll be going out for a bit."

With no boss around and no work to do, Arimbi chose to leave early that day. Her neck felt tense and stiff, which was strange on a day when she didn't have a stack of papers to hurriedly type up. It also felt odd when, from afar, she realized

that the house in which she now lived was painted a pastel shade of cream, and not white. She'd never come home while it was still light out before. In the dark, there was no difference between cream and white. She hadn't been aware of the color when she first found the house during her lunch break. Perhaps it was because she was in a rush, or her mind was no longer able to pick up that kind of detail.

From outside the fence, she could see that the yard was full of potted plants—red frangipani trees, rose bushes, palm trees, mango trees, and orange trees. Fruit was growing on some of the trees. They were smaller than if they'd been growing in the ground. The caretaker was watering the plants through a hose. Ah, she'd failed to notice even this before, Arimbi thought to herself.

Just as Arimbi was closing the gate behind her, a man on a motorbike pulled up outside. "Hold on, miss," he said in a friendly tone.

Arimbi held the gate open to let him in. She closed it once he was in the garage. He turned off the engine and took off his helmet. He was one of the boarders. Arimbi had never seen him before. But then again, she didn't remember any of the others who lived here, even if she'd previously run into them while coming down the stairs in the morning or opening the gate.

"You're back early," the man said as Arimbi went past the garage. They walked side by side to the house.

"Yes, while I still could." Arimbi tried to sound friendly, and flashed a small smile.

"You're in one of the upstairs rooms, right?"

"Haha."

"Where do you work?"

Arimbi didn't answer right away. This man didn't seem any different from the type that always sat next to her on the bus. They always asked where she worked and where she was from. And when Arimbi told them she worked at the courthouse, they always said, "I had a friend who worked in the courthouse in Samarinda." Or if Arimbi told them she was from Ponorogo, they would say that their neighbor's parents were born in Ponorogo but had lived in Jakarta for the past forty years. Ah... Arimbi detested that kind of banter. Why was it so important to try to find a commonality, and one that they didn't even bring up again after that? People like these tried hard to convince others that the world was a small place, when in truth the world was far too big for any one person to have something in common with another.

Arimbi had developed a lot of ways to avoid getting into a conversation with people like this who she encountered on the bus or while waiting in line to pay her electricity bill. She would yawn or hold up an old newspaper in front of her face, or answer them sharply and turn her face away. But it wouldn't be that easy when the person trying to start the conversation also lived under the same roof as her and passed through the same gate every day.

"At the courthouse," Arimbi said, her tone not as friendly as before.

"Oh... that's near where I work."

Just like all the others before, Arimbi thought, always trying to find something in common. She didn't say anything in response. Then he said, "Yes... we're only two buildings away from each other."

He held out his hand. "Let me introduce myself. We live

in the same house and we don't even know each other. I'm Ananta."

Arimbi took his hand. His clasp was strong and firm, and it lingered. After Arimbi had introduced herself, the man said, "Wow, our names are almost alike. We might be twins."

Arimbi laughed. She sensed something funny in the way he talked and in his face, something that would always elicit a laugh from whoever was listening. She realized that the way he spoke was fun, not like the others she often encountered. He also kept the conversation sensible, not asking all kinds of questions or trying to force something more out of the encounter. He seemed to take everything at face value. They became instant friends, the kind who would meet again, even if they didn't arrange to do so.

And they did indeed meet, often; purely by chance, with no arrangements. Yet their rooms were on different floors. Arimbi was upstairs and Ananta downstairs. They met once when Arimbi was leaving the house and Ananta was warming up his motorbike. Another time was when Arimbi was coming down the stairs and Ananta was locking his door. There was also the time Arimbi came home at seven at night and was locking the gate when Ananta greeted her from the garage. Perhaps they'd crossed paths several times before, Arimbi thought, but she just hadn't noticed.

On the last Saturday before the new year, Arimbi opened her door to find Ananta there. He'd come knocking out of the blue, with no word beforehand and little chitchat. Arimbi, flustered and embarrassed, suggested they go downstairs. They sat on the porch seats, facing the frangipani trees with their red flowers, all lined up in their pots.

Arimbi had never had a man come calling for her before.

She was bewildered, annoyed, scared, yet happy all at once. Ananta was a pleasant person to talk with. He was always joking, and Arimbi would always laugh throughout their conversations. Ananta was a surveyor at a financing company. His job was to go to the homes and offices of people who'd applied to buy motorbikes on credit, and verify that they lived and worked there. He told her about how some people would give a fake home address or workplace. "I went all the way to the address one guy had given for his office... and it turned out to be a cemetery," he said in that way of his that invited laughter.

He also told her about people who had fallen behind on their monthly installments. "When the collector shows up, they're told that the person they're looking for doesn't live there. And the whole time the person is hiding under the table." Again Arimbi burst out laughing.

Ananta then asked Arimbi to tell a story for a change. "I shouldn't be the only one rambling on the whole time," he said.

"But I don't have any stories. All I do every day is type."

"Wow, you could win a typing contest," Ananta chimed in.

Arimbi laughed again. "There will never be such a thing as a typing contest."

But she was drawn in. She wanted to match his banter, to make this man guffaw at her own funny stories. She decided to tell the story of Maemunah, the woman who caused such a scene in the courtroom and got everyone abuzz. She mimicked Maemunah's words down to her tone, and the expression on her face that was at once frightened yet angry. And sure

enough, Ananta burst out laughing, in between interjecting with "Oh, mercy," and "No way!"

On New Year's Eve, Arimbi found herself on the back of Ananta's motorbike as it snaked in between cars and joined a long line of other motorbikes. It seemed everyone was going to the same place: Monas Square. Ananta had asked her there to watch the fireworks and live music. "You can't spend New Year's Eve all alone in your room," he'd said after knocking on her door.

Arimbi was deliriously happy the whole ride there. Ananta was so good and so caring, she thought. In her eyes, he was markedly different from any other man she'd known. But then she hadn't really known any other men that well, apart from her father, and had never gone on a date while in Jakarta before now, on this motorbike with Ananta.

At Monas Square, they walked side by side, pressed together by the ever-moving crowd of thousands. More people poured in as the night wore on. Up ahead was a brightly lit stage with music coming from it. The band playing there was supposed to be really famous, but Arimbi didn't know any of their songs. The joy in her heart didn't let up even when a burly man carrying a bottle of liquor stepped on her foot. And her happiness only continued to grow as it began to rain and the water seeped down her back through the jacket she was wearing.

Ananta grabbed her hand and they ran through the dense crowd. A few people swore at them; others refused to give way. They reached the walled fence that bordered the Gambir train station. Ananta scrambled over first, then reached out to help Arimbi over. They huddled in the shelter of the

station wall, looking out on the motorbike parking lot. The rain intensified.

"Good thing we made it here," Ananta said.

"How can the others stay out in the rain like this?" Arimbi said as she took off her jacket and shook the raindrops from it.

"Well, it's New Year's Eve, after all," Ananta said.

"Then what are we doing here?" Arimbi asked teasingly.

"No point getting wet if we can see the fireworks just fine from here."

"You've done this often, haven't you?"

"Yes, I've lived here since I was little."

"In Jakarta? Then why do you board?"

"My parents decided to go back to their hometown. They sold their house here and bought one there."

"Ohhhh..." Arimbi nodded and didn't ask any more questions.

On the stroke of midnight, the fireworks lit up the pitch-black sky. It wasn't perfect; the rain was hard to beat. But for Arimbi, this was the biggest and brightest fireworks show she'd ever seen.

"When I was little, the only fireworks we had were those little wiry things," she said as she clapped.

The rain let up just as the fireworks show ended. Ananta led Arimbi on a stroll south, past the Tani Monument and down the sidewalk in front of the old buildings along Cikini. "No use getting the bike now. It's bound to be crowded. We'll just take it easy for now," Ananta said.

He held her hand as they walked down the street together. He kept talking about all kinds of things, from the bakery that

his mother used to go to regularly, to the cheap cinema in the Senen area that showed dirty movies.

They turned into the Ismail Marzuki Center and sat in front of the row of food stalls, which were closing down. Most of the food was finished, and the stall owners were putting away their pots and pans. Those still open were only serving coffee and instant noodles.

Ananta said he used to come here often when he was little. "Over there you can see the stars," he said, pointing to the building across from them.

Arimbi's heart fluttered. He was so attentive, she thought, and so... romantic! Every word he said transformed into a soft whisper when it reached her. Every story he told was like a living picture, one that entranced and entertained her for the whole day. Arimbi felt this must be what people meant by falling in love. Perhaps this was the result of all the prayers by her parents, she thought.

Arimbi no longer needed to take the bus to work. Ananta would drop her off, then turn back to go to his own office. When work was done, he would be waiting outside the courthouse. On their way back they would stop by the catfish stall at the top of the street leading to the boarding house. If they weren't in the mood for rice, Arimbi would take Ananta to the meatball stand in front of the catfish stall.

On Saturdays, they would stroll through the Blok M shopping complex. Ananta liked to drop in on the clothes stores and buy shirts for work, with the kind of labels that Arimbi often saw the lawyers at the court wearing. But of course the ones that Ananta bought were knockoffs. A long-sleeved shirt in white cost just forty thousand rupiah.

Arimbi never shopped for clothes. When prodded to get

something, she would say, "What for? I wear a uniform every day." Instead, she took Ananta to the supermarket, where they bought laundry detergent and bread for breakfast. At the checkout counter, Ananta quickly pulled out his wallet and paid. Arimbi of course pretended to object. She pulled out her own purse and said, "No need, no need!"

But Ananta insisted, saying, "I'm your boyfriend, after all!"

Arimbi smiled and blushed. This was indeed what a boyfriend should be like, she thought. Ananta had also since the beginning paid whenever they ate out together, but soon Arimbi persuaded him that they should take turns. "You don't earn that much either," she reminded him, at which he laughed.

On the morning of the third Sunday in January, as they rode on the motorbike, Ananta said softly, "Can I borrow some money?"

Arimbi frowned. No one had ever asked to borrow money from her before. When she got her pay each month, she wired three hundred thousand to her father's account. The rest was for her living expenses. She never went into debt, but she didn't exactly save much, either.

Before she could answer, Ananta went on: "I haven't gotten my salary yet. And yesterday I wired some money for my little brother. When I get paid on the twenty-fifth I'll pay you right back."

"Okay, okay. How much do you want to borrow?" Arimbi said quickly. She didn't want to come off as mean to her own boyfriend, especially since Ananta had been so good to her and always generous.

"Just two hundred thousand. Just to keep me afloat until payday."

"Ohhh." Arimbi was relieved. She was certain now that Ananta really only needed the money because he was pressed for it and forced to borrow just to stay above water.

On the night of the twenty-fifth, Ananta paid back the money. Arimbi wouldn't accept it, saying, "Keep it, so you'll have something in the bank." She felt that was what people should do when they were dating and in love.

* * *

In early February, Mrs. Danti left a sheet of paper on Arimbi's desk. It was a schedule of hearings that Arimbi would have to attend. At the bottom she'd written, "I have some business in Singapore tomorrow. I'll be back at the office on Monday."

She hadn't left any message about rulings that needed to be transcribed. All Arimbi had to do was attend two hearings, one for the next day and the other in the following next week. They were two very different cases: one was a domestic violence case, and the other corruption.

The first day of any trial was always an easy one for Arimbi. All she had to do was stay awake while the prosecutor read out the indictment, which in the domestic violence case ran to more than a hundred pages. But there was something different about this case. With every sentence uttered by the prosecutor, Arimbi felt increasingly as though she was watching a TV soap opera unfolding; her mind conjuring up the images and the prosecutor's words driving the plot.

The husband and wife in question were an affluent couple. He was a doctor, a cardiologist with seven clinics in Jakarta.

She was a professor with a doctorate in economics, who was often quoted in the newspapers.

"On the night of July 10, 2004, the defendant attempted to force his wife into having carnal relations. His wife refused, being unwell. But the defendant persisted, and unbuttoned his wife's blouse—she was still in her work clothes at the time—with such violence that it tore. The defendant also pulled off his wife's trousers so roughly that it left a laceration on her hip. When the defendant attempted to insert his genitals into his wife's, she objected because it was painful and she pushed the defendant away. The defendant got angry and hit his wife, twice on the right cheek and twice on the left cheek..."

The scene played out in Arimbi's head. She could see the husband ripping his wife's blouse off, then yanking off her pants. She could see his bloodshot eyes and his hungry glare. She could hear him panting as he preyed. She thought of the ferrets back in her village, when they stalked the chickens that they would later devour.

Arimbi told Ananta everything she had heard. When she tried to describe the wife, with a look of fear and anxiety on her face, Arimbi appeared sullen and cute. Ananta gazed at her intensely as she told the story. Arimbi felt he was intrigued by the story and kept on talking, often repeating things she'd already said.

At one in the morning, Ananta was still in Arimbi's room, leaning back on the wall as he sat holding a pillow in his lap. They usually called it a night before eleven, but Arimbi let him stay on. She wanted to be with him for as long as she could. She flushed. Was this what it felt like when one person liked another?

Ananta took Arimbi by the arm and asked her to sit closer

to him. Arimbi had of course been waiting to do just that. She'd been trying all night to edge her way closer to him, but was too shy. She'd waited too long and wanted him to make the first move.

They sat with their backs against the wall, Ananta's right arm pressed up against Arimbi's left arm. They both stared straight ahead at the television set. Arimbi felt her insides jump up and down. Her body felt warm, but her nape went cold. Everything was mixed up, then swelled up inside her. It felt good.

Arimbi sighed inside. In all her twenty-eight years, why had she never felt anything like this before? She was only told that having a boyfriend was so that you'd have someone to take you to school and back, and having a husband was so that you could have children and a family. No one ever said that having a man could feel so good. Back in high school, her friends would show off their stuffed panda dolls with ribbons that they said were gifts from boys. But none of them spoke about how the hairs on her arms would stand on end or how her chest would heave up and down, as though she was being pushed in a playground swing.

Arimbi blushed as Ananta stroked her cheek. He looked away, pretending to watch the TV. Arimbi felt warm before, but when his hands touched her cheeks, she realized she needed much more warmth. It felt so good to have her cheeks caressed like that. It was like sipping on a mug of hot chocolate while wrapped up in a thick blanket, with the air-conditioning set at seventeen degrees Celsius. But Arimbi quickly corrected herself: the sense of warmth, pleasure and comfort she'd just felt was unlike anything she had ever experienced before.

The warmth fluttered in her as Ananta's hand touched her

neck. He stroked her right ear, then moved down, cupping her chin, before stroking back up on the left side of her face, where he fingered her earring. He repeated the motion, again and again. Faster each time, and more erratic. Arimbi closed her eyes. She imagined herself lying down on a grassy field, with the wind blowing, but not too strong. Ah, it felt so good, she kept saying to herself over and over.

She felt Ananta's hand struggling to reach her breast. He was trying to reach into her tight T-shirt. Growing impatient, he began to pull off her T-shirt, and she obliged by raising her arms. He slid the T-shirt over her body and threw it aside. Arimbi suddenly felt embarrassed sitting there in only her bra. She realized that all the bras she had were shabby. The straps on some of them had lost their elasticity, and almost all of them had black spots on the back. She couldn't remember which bra she was wearing just then. She was busy —busy trying to fend off a sense of elation, willing herself not to scream. She let Ananta take off her bra. She writhed under Ananta's tongue as it played all over her body. That night, they began—and they consummated.

* * *

Life changed for Arimbi from that point on. No longer was she just a machine going through the same motions over and over. She wasn't just a bell that rang with the chiming of the hour. And she wasn't a half-alive being anymore, one who went back to being dead after office hours. She was fully alive, doing what she felt. The highly regulated machine was dead, and in its place was a mess of emotions, rising and falling, sometimes floating and sometimes spilling over.

Every morning she would wake up and bathe in a hurry, then spend a long time in front of the mirror. For years she'd made herself up the same way, never changing the color of her lipstick and always combing her hair in the same style. But since she'd been with Ananta, Arimbi became like a middle-school girl trying out lipstick for the first time.

At work, during lulls in the hearings, she would send out several text messages. The questions were often the same, and the answers hardly ever varied. At lunch, she would tell Anisa everything that Ananta had said the night before. Anisa would listen impatiently, then, clearly relieved when Arimbi's story was over, would quickly change the topic to herself.

After three in the afternoon, Arimbi's mind would jump over the fence of the courthouse. Her typing would slow down, her fingers pausing after each stroke of the key. Fortunately for her, Mrs. Danti hadn't assigned her any rulings to type up this month. The only work she had was to clean up the notes she'd typed during the previous hearing, to submit to the judges before the next hearing.

Arimbi would start packing her things before four o'clock. Then she would surreptitiously slip away from her desk, following Anisa who always left earlier than her. And waiting outside as usual would be Ananta. They would arrive back at the house while it was still light out. They would watch TV in Arimbi's together. Sometimes Ananta slept for a while on Arimbi's bed while she did the laundry. Neither of them remembered how it started, but Ananta's clothes always ended up in Arimbi's laundry now. Arimbi didn't mind. This was what a woman who loved her man should do, she thought. Her mother also washed for her father. All the other women back in the village did the same. And if Anisa and Mrs. Danti

didn't, it was just because they had people they paid every month to do their laundry for them.

At eight o'clock they would leave the house to get dinner. Sometimes they walked; other times they would take the motorbike out of the garage. They were never gone more than an hour before they came rushing back, like people in desperate need of the toilet. But the moment they reached Arimbi's room, neither of them went to the toiler. Instead, they thrashed about on the bed, exploring every point on each other's body. They began the same way each time, but the feeling at the end was always different. When it was over and they were left panting and their bodies spent, Arimbi forgot how all day she'd been longing for just this.

In mid-May, when Mrs. Danti was out of town again, Anisa didn't come in to work, and Wahendra was out doing who knows what, a young man came to Arimbi's office. There was a sense of urgency in his every gesture, and a look of bewilderment in his face. He paused at the door and looked around for someone or something without seeming to know who or what exactly.

"Who are you looking for, sir?"

"Hmmm... Where's the clerical section?"

"This is it."

"Are you the chief clerk?"

"No, that's my boss. I'm a junior clerk."

"Can I see your boss?"

"She's out of town for work. She'll be back in a week."

The man fell silent for a moment as though he was thinking

of something. Then he came up to Arimbi's desk, pulled up a chair next to her and sat down.

"It's like this, miss: I'm the lawyer for the woman who got hit, the one whose husband was acquitted yesterday.." He left the sentence hanging in the air as though he'd forgotten something. Or more precisely, as though he was weighing which word to choose, whether one was more offensive than the other.

Arimbi didn't say anything. She knew the case. She'd been the clerk from the start of the trial right through the ruling. But she couldn't fathom what this man wanted. Only now did she realize that he'd always been in the courtroom during each hearing. He sat in the front row of the public gallery, along with a group of other neatly dressed men. They were all the lawyers for the woman who claimed to have been beaten by her husband. At the trial, they only watched; the case was handled by state prosecutors.

"It's like this, miss..." he said again, pausing for a moment. "This is actually the first time I've had to attend to matters here. Over at Central or East they all know me. Especially at the religious affairs courts. Alimony, child custody—everyone knows our office." He stopped again. This time, though, he spoke differently. He gestured with his hands, there was an edge in every word, and the look in his eyes was no different from that of the people who sold gym memberships. Arimbi had a hard time turning down that kind of person. She once paid three hundred thousand for a gym membership for six months. They said it was a promotional price that was half the regular price. But after paying, Arimbi didn't go to the gym even once. Since then, she always tried to avoid such people. Once they started giving their spiel, it was difficult for her to

stop them, and in the end she would have to pay, whether for a gym membership, an Amway group, or for body scrub products that just piled up in her bathroom. But this man wasn't a salesman, Arimbi thought. He was a lawyer.

"It's like this, miss," he said for the third time. Arimbi was keeping count. "I need your help. I need an official copy of the verdict urgently. My client wants to file an appeal right away."

"Goodness, I don't know about that sort of thing. I just do as my boss tells me. I only type up the rulings once I get the order to do so."

"Well, in that case, help me get in touch with your boss, miss. There's no need to be coy about it. We may have just met, but we both know the score: eighty-six¹, alright?" He raised both thumbs and grinned. Then he quickly added, "Oh, and don't forget, my name's Adrian." Arimbi shook his outstretched hand and gave her name.

"Oh... Miss Arimbi. What's your boss's name?"

"Mrs. Danti."

"So you can take care of it, miss? Just phone Mrs. Danti. Problem solved. Or maybe it's enough for you to handle it yourself?"

"Oh, I already told you. I don't know about things like this. Besides, the trial only ended yesterday. I've still got rulings from trials from last year that haven't been typed up."

"Ah... Miss Arimbi, I don't believe you're leveling with me," Adrian said in a playful tone. He laughed.

Arimbi felt miffed. "I'm being serious. Believe what you want, but I can't help you."

¹ Originally police code to mean "all clear". It was later adopted in popular parlance to mean resolving a matter through money.

"Hey now, no need to get angry," Adrian said, half cajoling her. "Well, never mind. Just let me have Mrs. Danti's phone number, then."

"I can't give her phone number out to just anyone," Arimbi said in a high tone. She was starting to lose her patience.

"In that case, please call her up now. Tell her there's a lawyer who wants to talk to her."

Arimbi gave up. She'd run out of excuses. At the other end of the line Mrs. Danti sounded cheerful.

"Hi, Mbi. What's up? I'm shopping for my kids."

"Wow, how fun... Did you bring your kids too?" Arimbi asked, making small talk. But she also honestly didn't know whether Mrs. Danti had taken her children to Bali. She was supposed to be at a seminar.

"Yes, I figured what the heck. The seminar ended yesterday. So now I'm having fun with my kids." Mrs. Danti laughed.

Arimbi laughed too, then said, "Ma'am, there's a lawyer here looking for you."

"Whose lawyer?"

"The lawyer in the domestic violence case, ma'am. The one that was ruled on yesterday..."

Mrs. Danti asked to speak to the lawyer. Adrian took Arimbi's mobile phone and moved out of earshot. Arimbi couldn't hear anything he said. Adrian laughed as he returned to Arimbi's desk. He handed back the phone with Mrs. Danti still on the line. "Mbi, please type up the ruling today. Ask the judges for their signature tomorrow morning. I'll call them about it so that they can sign it first thing tomorrow."

"But, ma'am, it's two o'clock. How can I finish it today?"

"Oh, you know Judge Made's rulings are short. Anyway, you

can do some overtime. There's a bonus in it for you. It's not bad, Mbi, enough to get married on."

Arimbi took her work home that night. She also brought the office notebook computer that was normally used during hearings.

"The bonus must be pretty good, Mbi," Ananta said when they were together in her room. He sat cross-legged on the floor, leaning back against the wall near the door while smoking. In front of him was a plate with chicken bones. They'd bought fried chicken and rice earlier to eat in the room.

Arimbi was sitting on her bed. She had a pillow in front of her and the computer on top of it. In her lap was a sheaf of papers in Judge Made's handwriting. Arimbi's fingers danced across the keyboard. Her eyes moved constantly from the papers in her lap to the screen in front of her.

"How much do you usually get, Mbi?"

"I don't know. I've never gotten it before."

"What? How can that be, a civil servant like you?"

"I'm just a typist. You can see for yourself: late at night like this and I'm still typing."

"But it's the typist who gets the biggest cut. Even messenger guys get a hefty cut."

"Ah, don't be a know-it-all."

"Hey, my father used to be a messenger!"

"Oh, really?" Arimbi was surprised. She looked Ananta in the face. "He was a messenger at a court?"

Ananta laughed. "Unfortunately, no. If he was, I'd have had a huge inheritance. No, he was a messenger at the land office."

"The land office?" Arimbi grew more intrigued. The whole

time she'd known Ananta, they rarely spoke about their respective families. And now that the subject had been broached, Arimbi wanted to know more about her lover's parents.

"Yes, I mean the land registry office, where you get land title deeds. He wasn't strictly a messenger. He did all kinds of things. Sometimes he delivered letters, sometimes he made photocopies, sometimes he went out to buy food..." Ananta broke off laughing mid-sentence. Then he said, "Yeah, you know—a gofer, that sort of thing!"

"Ohhh..." Arimbi didn't know what to say. In her mind she saw Mamat, the gofer at her own office. He was young, barely out of vocational school in his hometown of Indramayu. He was neighbors with Mr. Yayat, the new judge who had just been transferred to the court from Kalimantan. It was a promotion, they said. Mr. Yayat brought Mamat with him to Jakarta and got him a job as a gofer at the court. Arimbi usually got him to photocopy letters for her. Occasionally if she and Anisa didn't feel like going to the canteen for lunch, they would ask Mamat to go out and get something for them. For his troubles, Arimbi and Anisa would tip him a thousand rupiah each. Ananta's father must have been someone like that, Arimbi thought.

"My father used to make quite a bit on the side, Mbi. He'd get a percentage off this and that, usually helping out people get their title deeds issued."

"Oh, really?" Arimbi was skeptical. Again she thought of Mamat. What would a gofer know about office affairs, especially about getting a certificate issued? "How did he do it?"

"He just did. Getting the deed made is difficult. If you

don't know someone on the inside you'll never get it done. That's where my father came in by helping people."

"Your father helped people get their title deeds?" Arimbi still didn't believe it was possible. Your father was just a gofer, she thought. She didn't have the heart to say it out loud.

"Yes... he helped them. He wasn't the one that got the deeds made, though," Ananta said, his tone getting higher. He could tell that Arimbi didn't believe him.

"How did he do it?"

"You work in a court; how do you not know how this sort of thing works?"

Arimbi shook her head. "I've never had to issue a certificate."

Ananta tut-tutted. "It's like this: Applying for a title deed is difficult. If you want it done, you have to know someone on the inside, and you've got to pay. Now my father's job was to bring the people who wanted a deed to the people on the inside. He got a cut from everyone he brought."

"Ohhh..." Arimbi nodded. She wasn't pretending; she genuinely only just understood. She could imagine Ananta's father finding a confused-looking person outside the land office. She pictured him approaching the person and offering to help—of course in exchange for a payment outside whatever arrangement the person on the inside had. The matter would be solved with money. Everyone would get their cut.

"Back in the day," Ananta went on, "the commissions that my father would make on those sorts of deals could be double his salary." There was a note of pride in the way he spoke, like a retired soldier passionately recounting his time in the battlefield. "He even bought me a motorbike when I was in high school."

"The one you have now?"

"No, this is a new one. I got that on credit from my boss. No, I've sold the old one."

"So where are your parents now?"

"Back in the village. My father's retired."

Arimbi already knew that. But she wanted details. "Where's their hometown?"

"Klaten. You can't live on the pension a gofer gets in Jakarta. It's a hundred and fifty thousand rupiah a month at the most. It's nowhere near enough. So they went back to the village."

"And you're their only child?"

"I have a younger sister. She's already married. She lives there too."

Arimbi didn't ask any more questions. She felt she knew a lot now about Ananta's family. Besides, the handwritten papers in front of her needed to be typed up immediately. Her fingers resumed their dance across the keyboard. Ananta left the room to boil a kettle of water in the kitchen, then returned carrying two glasses of coffee. Arimbi flushed as she took the glass he held out to her. She felt so pampered.

The room was silent for a while. Finally Ananta spoke up: "So, Mbi, if you could make a little extra here and there, that would be great for us."

Arimbi stopped typing and looked at him. "I can't. I don't know how."

"Just like you're doing tonight. If you don't type this up, who else can?"

Arimbi shook her head.

"Look, tomorrow you just ask for a percentage from the guy that asked for the document. If there's nothing in it for you, no need to give it to him."

"Mrs. Danti said there would be a bonus for me."

"Any bonus you get from the boss is a separate deal."

Arimbi remembered what Anisa had said. She told it to Ananta in full, leaving nothing out.

"See, your friend can do it, so why can't you?"

"She's been working there longer than I have."

"Well, you're working there now. You might as well learn."

Arimbi suddenly remembered something. She smiled and said softly, "Where do you think I got this AC from?"

Ananta burst out laughing. "There you are claiming you can't do it, you don't know how and all... And all this time you're playing in the big leagues. You didn't just get a cut—you got an AC!"

"Shush! I didn't even know anything about it. I never asked for it. They just delivered it to me all of a sudden. They said it was a token of appreciation. It was only the one time, and nothing since."

Ananta laughed again. "It's a waste being a civil servant if you're like that the whole time. You've got to start now. If you don't, you'll regret it once you've retired."

"Hmmm... but I'm embarrassed. How do I go about asking?"

"It's a custom by now. I'm sure all your friends are doing it. It's common. There's no need to be embarrassed about it."

Arimbi didn't say anything. She thought about what Ananta said and compared it to what Anisa had told her.

"It's for the future, Mbi. We'll be able to save up to buy a house. You don't want to live in a boarding room like this forever, do you?" Ananta said. His tone this time was soft, pleading.

The next day, Arimbi went to work earlier than usual. Mrs.

Danti had sent her a text message late at night telling her that Judge Made would be waiting in his room at seven-thirty.

No one else had arrived when Arimbi walked into the large room. There were nine desks inside, piled high with papers, and high-backed chairs of the kind that business executives used. The two air conditioners on opposite walls of the room were running, turned on earlier by the office gofer. A large television screen stood at the far end of the room, within sight of anyone sitting in any of the nine chairs. At the opposite end was a huge aquarium that took up nearly half the wall, full of colorful fish. This was the judges' room. It was Arimbi's first time inside.

There were two doors in the room leading to other rooms. They were the offices of Judge Dewabrata, who was the court's chief judge, and Judge Made, the deputy chief. The rest of the judges shared the large room.

Arimbi knocked on the door with the plaque that read, "Deputy Court Chief: Made Wirawan, S.H." From inside she heard a man's voice telling her to come in. The room wasn't very big, about the size of Arimbi's boarding room. A TV was on, showing pictures from the wedding of a soap opera star. Judge Made was seated in his chair, smoking. He looked small and old, very different from when he was presiding over a hearing. Seated at the bench, he appeared tall, broad, strong and dignified. Perhaps that was the impression that the robe gave, Arimbi thought.

"From Mrs. Danti, yes?" Judge Made asked.

"Yes, sir. She asked for your signature."

Judge Made held out his hand for the papers Arimbi was holding. She gave them to him and said, "Sorry, sir, I didn't have time to bind them yet. I just finished typing them."

Judge Made didn't say anything. He signed it quickly and handed it back to Arimbi. Then he asked, "Where's Mrs. Danti?"

"Still in Bali, sir. There's a seminar."

Judge Made laughed. "Always vacationing, that one."

Arimbi smiled. She didn't know whether to laugh as well or not.

It was nearly ten-thirty when a young man appeared in the clerical office. Arimbi recognized him right away. It was Adrian, the lawyer responsible for her pulling an all-nighter. Arimbi got up and invited him to the couch in the corner of the room. They didn't waste much time chitchatting. Arimbi handed over a copy of the ruling. Adrian skimmed through it, then smiled and said, "Thank you, miss. I told you it could be done, right?"

Arimbi forced a smile. She was thinking about how to ask for her cut. But it felt as though her lips were sealed and she couldn't say what she wanted.

Adrian took a brown envelope from his bag. "Give this to Mrs. Danti. She said yesterday that I should pass it through you."

Arimbi took it. The envelope was filled with cash. Arimbi felt its heft and its thickness. Adrian slipped the copy of the verdict into his bag and stood up, ready to leave the room. As he held out his hand to Arimbi, she finally blurted out, "Where's my cut? I was the one who stayed up all night typing." The words just came out. They felt light and somewhat gelded.

"What, don't you usually get a cut from your boss?"

"No, that won't do. I didn't get any sleep last night because I was working on this. Give me a cut for my overtime."

Adrian laughed. He took his wallet from his pocket and pulled out two hundred-thousand-rupiah bills. "Here, maybe you can help me out again next time," he said as he pressed the money into Arimbi's palm.

Arimbi smiled. "Of course! Come as often as you like!"

It really was that easy, Arimbi thought. She stood in the entrance of the courthouse with the two hundred thousand in her hand, waiting until Adrian got into his car. She did some calculations: If she had to type up two rulings in a week, she would get four hundred thousand. In a month, she could make more than one and a half million. And that was before the bonus that Mrs. Danti owed her. From now on, she would have to sweet-talk Mrs. Danti to ask for a bonus for each ruling she typed up. Two hundred thousand was nothing for these people, Arimbi thought.

At lunch that day, Arimbi cut ahead of Anisa as she was about to pay for her food.

"My treat, since I got lucky,"

Anisa raised her eyebrow in bewilderment. Then she laughed and said, "I know, it must have been that lawyer from earlier this morning!"

Arimbi laughed. Her face went red. "Don't tell anyone!"

Anisa laughed even harder. "Who would I tell? Everyone here does the same thing. So everyone knows what's going on. The stupid ones are those that get nothing. And to make things worse, everyone thinks that they *do* get something."

Arimbi's expression changed in an instant. She whispered, "But there's really nothing wrong with it, is there?"

"Of course there's nothing wrong! You're earning, aren't you?" Anisa said, still laughing hard. "Everyone does it, Mbi. So it's normal. Besides, how much did you get?"

Arimbi raised her index and middle fingers.

"Two million?"

"No... two hundred thousand!"

"Ohhh... yeah, two hundred sounds right. I thought two million. It would have been amazing if you'd gotten two million," Anisa said, laughing again. Arimbi laughed too. A sense of satisfaction and pride buoyed up inside her.

"Eighty-six all the way!" Anisa exclaimed.

"Huh? What do you mean?" Arimbi remembered what Adrian had said the day before. He'd also said "eighty-six".

"All settled and done!" Anisa said as she rubbed her fingers together like someone counting bills.

That evening, after leaving work, Arimbi asked Ananta not to take them back to the boarding house just yet. She wanted to go out, have fun and eat something good. They had to celebrate her luck. It was money that they could spend without feeling guilty. It was so easy to get. And after this, Arimbi thought, she would get another one. They would come thick and fast.

They ate at a seafood stall under a tarpaulin tent in the Kemang area. Across from them was a restaurant whose parking lot was packed with cars. From where she sat, Arimbi could see the waiters at the restaurant in the red uniforms bringing out huge platters of food. She couldn't tell what they were. In the center of each table was a flower-shaped candle.

"That's a famous restaurant. They say the food is really good. One day when we're really lucky, we should go eat there," Ananta said.

"Look at you; that's a rich person's place."

"And who says we can't be rich?"

Arimbi laughed. Ananta laughed too. He put his arm

around her shoulder, embraced her and kissed her cheek. Arimbi shook him off. "People are watching."

The stall owner brought over their food: a small basket of rice, a serving of crab in padang sauce, a plate of batter-fried calamari, and two skewers of grilled prawns. Ananta had chosen the dishes. Arimbi had never eaten anything like it before. Ananta was also the one who picked the seafood stall. Arimbi just said she wanted to eat something nice, and Ananta had whisked her there right away.

"Come on, let's eat well tonight," he said.

Arimbi smiled. She tried each of the dishes. "Delicious," she kept saying.

* * *

Arimbi learned quickly. She would introduce herself to all the prosecutors and lawyers involved in the hearings that she attended. She would start out by engaging the prosecutors in small talk outside the courtroom, or by greeting the lawyers in the canteen during lunch. Having become well acquainted after two encounters, they would trade phone numbers and tell each other to call if they needed anything.

Arimbi sometimes felt a pang of regret. What had she been doing the past four years? She was just a dumb clerk who only knew how to type up the judges' handwritten scrawl on the computer. She'd spent entire days listening to people arguing in the courtroom without ever knowing who they were. She'd lived from paycheck to paycheck. But if she'd been smart from early on, she might have had her own house by now. Oh, but she was still young, she thought. She still had lots of time to start over.

In front of Mrs. Danti, Arimbi was no longer the shy, quiet and naïve worker she once was. She was always the first to greet her boss, and would compliment her on her shoes or ask what she did with her hair to keep it so healthy and beautiful. Mrs. Danti's eyes would light up in the face of such flattery, and she would respond with enthusiasm.

Whenever Arimbi submitted a transcribed copy of a ruling that Mrs. Danti had asked for, she would sweet-talk her some more. "Where's my bonus, ma'am?" she would ask.

Mrs. Danti would then take her purse from her bag and hand over a number of bills to Arimbi. It was never the same amount each time. Usually it was a hundred and fifty thousand. Once she gave two hundred thousand. And on one occasion, with her face positively glowing, Mrs. Danti handed over three hundred-thousand-rupiah bills. Arimbi never talked about the figures. She happily accepted whatever she got.

Through the lawyers she'd befriended, Arimbi had plenty of opportunity to get another cut. They often called it snack money or makeup money. The amount was similar, a hundred thousand or two hundred thousand each time. They often gave it to her unsolicited at the end of each month: spreading the wealth after payday, they would say. Arimbi would laugh happily and say, "Yes, if you've got a big salary you have to share it. That way you get blessed." The lawyers would respond with a laugh.

Arimbi was always willing to help the ones who paid her each month. Ian Panggabean, the assistant to one well-known lawyer, phoned her up one night to ask for the phone number of a judge. Arimbi didn't have the number of the judge he wanted, but promised to find it for him. So bright and early the next day, she showed up at the court's administrative affairs

office with the excuse that Mrs. Danti had sent her to ask for the judge's number.

Condroyono, a lawyer who handled land disputes, always asked for the minutes that Arimbi made of the hearings. There was also Samuel Hutabarat, a lawyer whose more recent case hadn't gone to court yet and who asked that the first hearing be held the coming Wednesday afternoon. Arimbi was at a complete loss as to how to fulfill that request. The schedules for the hearings depended entirely on the judges. She told the lawyer she would do as he asked, but she didn't know how she would do it. And that's when fortune smiled on her, because as it happened, the judge went on to schedule the hearing for that Wednesday afternoon. Samuel was ecstatic. He was convinced Arimbi had arranged it. He thanked her with an envelope stuffed with ten hundred-thousand-rupiah notes, and exclaimed, "Done! Eighty-six!"

Arimbi put all the money away in a drawer in her boarding room. She used her salary to pay for her meals, to buy detergent and to pay her rent. But she no longer had a sense of anxiety when she stood at the supermarket checkout with her monthly shopping. She no longer had to think about how to make her salary last through the month, or painstakingly squirrel away a bit at a time in case of an unexpected expense. She felt safe now. She was earning money outside of her salary. And even if she spent it all, she was bound to get more right away.

Arimbi sold her mobile phone for three hundred thousand and bought a new one for one and a half million. Everyone said her new phone was state-of-the-art, but Arimbi didn't really understand it. She just bought it for how it looked. It was beautiful in red, with a large, colorful screen. When it

rang, the sound was melodious—it could even be changed with a song. But what was more important for Arimbi was that she never needed to feel embarrassed again when exchanging phone numbers with the lawyers.

Arimbi also bought new shoes and a bag in matching colors. She copied Mrs. Danti's style of always matching her bag with her shoes. She was lucky she wore a uniform to work every day; that way she didn't have to worry about getting clothes. Instead, Arimbi bought Ananta three new shirts. Two of them were checkered and one was white. "For work, so you can wear something different every day," she said.

Ananta accepted the gift happily. He enjoyed shopping and getting dressed up. But his happiness was no greater than what Arimbi felt at having bought her boyfriend new clothes. So this was happiness, she thought. It wasn't when she was receiving money, and not even when she and Ananta kissed passionately. But it was in being able to make Ananta, the man she loved, laugh with abandon.

Arimbi began wiring her parents five hundred thousand a month, more than the three hundred thousand she used to send. She told them over the phone that she'd had a lucky break. Her father couldn't stop giving thanks. He said they would slaughter a chicken for her and have a small thanksgiving ceremony so that her blessings would multiply. Arimbi agreed wholeheartedly. In her mind she saw more and more lawyers coming up to her, giving her a cut that was much more than just one or two hundred-thousand-rupiah bills.

"Your fortune might be good, Mbi, but don't forget about marriage," her father said over the phone.

Arimbi blushed. She still hadn't told her parents about Ananta. She was embarrassed and confused. She didn't know

how to tell them, not even when they broached the subject like her father had just done.

"Then pray that the man I'm with now is the one, Father."

"Er... what... You mean you've found someone?"

Arimbi nodded, even though her father back in the village couldn't see.

"Mbi, do you have someone?" he asked again.

"Yes, Father. Just pray that it all goes smoothly."

"Well, in that case you've got to bring him home right away, Mbi. You should introduce him to your parents and quickly make it official. You don't want him to get away."

An embarrassed Arimbi later recounted to Ananta what her father had said. Ananta took it all with good spirits. "He's right, Mbi. We should get married right away so that our life together is more certain. That way we can save money together. We can cut down on expenses once we're married. At the very least, we won't have to rent two rooms like we do now."

It was the first of June, and Arimbi and Ananta were among the crowd waiting for the train at Pasar Senen Station. They were going back to their hometowns, first to Klaten and then to Ponorogo. They would meet each other's family, propose, then marry right away. All on this one trip. It was easier that way, and cheaper. Ananta said they should go by train. Arimbi agreed. She'd never traveled on a train before. They would be away for a week. Ananta took four days of paid leave. Arimbi just needed to ask Mrs. Danti for time off. It wasn't difficult because there were no hearings she had to attend during that week. She'd also finished all the transcriptions that were due. She bought gifts before they left, for her family and for Ananta's. She also prepared money to hand out and for the wedding. She didn't know much about what her parents planned to do. They were arranging everything, including paying for the wedding. She knew that the payment her

father had just received a month earlier for his entire orange crop would go toward the event.

It was a quarter to four, and people were jostling to get into the train for Solo, which was already at the platform. Arimbi, carrying a large bag filled with clothes, walked slowly and fearfully. She was shoved several times by people rushing to get into the long metal tube. Ananta carried a backpack full of clothes and a duffel bag with gifts, and strode quickly toward the door of the train car. He gripped Arimbi's hand in his. "Come on, move faster so we can get a seat."

Arimbi followed him down the aisle of the train car. They looked left and right for empty seats. Arimbi never thought riding the train would be like this. It was so packed with people, all fighting for a seat, and now it seemed they would miss out. All the seats were taken.

They kept going, jumping over the barrier between each train car and down the aisle of each car. They weren't the only ones without a seat. Behind Arimbi was a whole column of people also looking for someplace to sit.

The locomotive roared to life and the train began to shudder. Arimbi lost her balance as the train lurched off to a start. The person behind her caught her. Arimbi quickly got to her feet and apologized.

They reached the very last train car. There were no empty seats. Ananta turned around and walked back the way they had come. They stopped in the middle car, which had transformed into a food stall. There was a single empty seat facing the high table fixed into the wall of the train car. Ananta told Arimbi to sit there. "I'll be over here," he said, pointing toward a group of men chatting near the door.

Arimbi sat facing the wall. It wasn't the ideal place to sit for

very long. The back was vertical, and her feet didn't reach the floor. She wouldn't be able to sleep in this seat. Next to her a man was sleeping with his face buried in his arm on the table. Near him was a cup of instant noodles with a bit of soup still inside. He'd just eaten. Arimbi suddenly wanted to eat. She looked around her. Several of the other seated passengers were eating. She got up and put her bag on the seat so that no one would take it while she was away. She went toward the doorway of the train car, where Ananta was sitting on the floor with several other men. They were chatting and playing cards.

"Mbi, what are you doing here?"

"I'm hungry! Let's get something to eat."

Ananta put down his cards and got up, telling the others, "I'm off. Gotta accompany the wife-to-be."

Arimbi blushed at the words. It felt good having the man she loved call her his wife-to-be. But she was even more pleased that he'd said it to a group of other people. She felt cherished. Every day she fell deeper and deeper in love. She was certain that Ananta would be a loyal husband and a loving and patient father. She never tired of imagining how wonderful her life would always be with Ananta by her side. They would enjoy day anew. There would be no boredom, no regrets. Ananta wasn't a man of means. What he made in a month was no more than the money she made on the side. But finding a good husband was about more than just material possessions, Arimbi thought. Besides, it made no difference if she was the main breadwinner and not him.

They ate their instant noodles sitting against the door of the train car, a newspaper sheet spread out beneath them. Arimbi didn't want to sit in the seat again. It was more comfortable on

the floor, she said, where she could stretch out, lean back and go to sleep. "Besides, I want to be with you," she said coyly.

On the other side of the door were five men engrossed in a game of cards. They looked like they knew each other well. They had to move once in a while whenever one of the other passengers wanted to go to the toilet, which was right behind them.

"Are we going to sit on the floor the whole way to Klaten?" Arimbi asked.

"I'm hoping that a lot of people will get off at Cirebon."

"Is it always like this when you take the train?"

"Yes. On a slow day you can get a seat. But I don't know why it's so crowded this time around."

A man in a blue uniform appeared before them. He was a railway official. The five men playing cards greeted him. It seemed like they knew one another. It amazed Arimbi how everyone knew everyone else on board this train.

Each of the men handed over some money to the official. Arimbi couldn't see how much it was, but she guessed it was for the fare. It was no different from taking the bus, from what she could tell: you paid after you got on. And yet every time she took the bus back to her hometown, she had to search days in advance for a ticket.

The official came up to Arimbi and Ananta.

"Where are you getting off?"

"Klaten, sir," Ananta said as he held out three ten-thousand-rupiah bills.

"This isn't enough. All the fares have gone up. And it's peak season now."

"But that's usually the fare," Ananta said with a smile.

"Ten more. Forty for the two of you."

Ananta reluctantly took another ten-thousand bill from his pocket. The official smiled. "If there are any free seats I'll tell you. Shame for her to be sitting on the floor," he said as he left.

"I usually pay fifteen," Ananta grumbled.

"Has the fare gone up?"

"Gone up, my foot. He was just taking advantage. It's going straight into his pocket."

"How is that possible?"

"That's just how it is when there's a tacit understanding. I don't buy a ticket, and he gets his commission. It's a win-win," Ananta said. "If I'd bought a ticket it would have been expensive; fifty thousand each."

"But would we have gotten seats?" Arimbi asked doubtfully.

"Heck, even if you don't buy a ticket you can still get a seat. Not everyone you see sitting has a ticket. We were just not quick enough."

The official walked back past them. He acknowledged the five men playing cards, then looked back at Arimbi and said, "It's all full. I'll check again when we reach Cirebon." Arimbi nodded and Ananta thanked the official, who went back into the other train car. His ticket-taking duties were done.

Arimbi stacked up the used instant noodle cups and set them aside. She leaned back, trying to find a comfortable position to sleep in. Straight ahead of her was the window in the car door, against which the card players were leaning. She couldn't see anything. It was dark all around. Ananta said that during the day, they would have been able to see beautiful scenery: rice fields, hills and wide rivers. Arimbi saw the toilet

door opening slowly. She hadn't noticed that there was someone inside. A lot of people had gone in and out, and she hadn't noticed them all.

A man stepped out of the toilet and stood in front of the door while looking all around him,.

"Clear!" one of the card players called out.

The man smiled, then said, "Thanks, bro."

The man turned back to the toilet and pushed the door open wide. A woman carrying a baby stepped out. Goodness, there'd been three people in that tiny toilet, Arimbi thought. She nudged Ananta, wanting to tell him about what she was seeing, but he didn't respond.

The man pointed toward Arimbi. The woman with the baby came up to her.

"Excuse me, miss. I hope you don't mind if I sit next to you."

"Ohhh... not at all," Arimbi said, making some room.

The baby began crying. Arimbi wondered why he hadn't made a sound the whole time he was in the toilet, and was only crying now. The woman rocked the baby in her arms and said, "Shhh! Don't cry. We'll be home soon enough. It'll be nice over there. Shhh... hush... hush."

"Is he thirsty? Shouldn't you breast-feed him?" Arimbi asked hesitantly. She didn't know much about babies.

The woman shook her head, smiling. Then she said, "He doesn't breast-feed anymore. It's stopped coming out."

"Oh..." Arimbi said. She held out a bottle of water that she'd bought at the train station. "Can he drink this?"

The woman nodded. She took the bottle, opened it and put it to the baby's mouth. Arimbi was slightly taken aback at the sight of this baby with his tiny mouth being fed from a water

bottle. She'd only ever seen babies being breast-fed or drinking from baby bottles. But this mother was feeding her baby from a water bottle just like that, letting the water trickle slowly into his mouth.

The baby stopped crying. The woman raised the bottle to her own lips. There was a little left when she stopped drinking. She called out to the man, presumably her husband, and he nodded. She then put the cap back onto the bottle and tossed it to him.

The baby was fast asleep. Arimbi looked at Ananta; he was snoring. The woman shifted her position and lay back. "Thank you very much, miss. I'm sorry if we've been a bother," she said.

"It's alright," Arimbi said. "Where are you going?"

"Back to the village. Kulonprogo."

They fell silent. Arimbi wanted to know more, but she didn't know how to ask. The woman suddenly giggled. "We were hiding in the toilet to avoid the conductor," she said, still giggling. She was laughing at herself.

"You don't have a ticket?" Arimbi asked, instantly realizing how stupid her question was. Of course they didn't have tickets. But was there anything more appropriate she could have said?

"We're winging it, miss," the woman replied. "Just as long as we get back home. It's better there."

"You lived in Jakarta?"

"For a year. My husband was there three years. He was working there, then he returned to the village and we got married. I followed him back to Jakarta after that."

"Then... why are you going back to the village?"

"The factory where he worked is gone. It burned down half

a year ago. He got severance pay, and we planned to live on it until he could find another job. But it all went to paying for the baby's birth. Meanwhile, he still couldn't find a job and there was no more money, yet we had to eat. And forget about paying the rent."

Arimbi thought of Narno, her school friend who returned to the village after losing his job. Their fates were the same, she thought.

"And what do you do, miss?"

"I'm a civil servant. At a district court."

"Wow, an office worker. You're lucky, miss, you won't have to struggle to get by. You were probably good in school, right?"

"Not really," Arimbi said, laughing.

The woman stroked her baby's forehead and said, "When you grow up you'll work in an office too, child. Don't be a factory worker like your father."

Arimbi smiled when she heard that. She suddenly remembered the snacks that she was carrying from Jakarta. The young couple had probably not eaten, she thought. She offered a cookie to the woman, who took it without any shyness. She called to her husband, and he came over and sat next to her.

The train rocked violently, then came to a grinding halt. Everyone was flung forward. Ananta woke up and quickly pulled Arimbi to her feet. The woman and her husband also got up and scrambled to hide behind Ananta and Arimbi.

The door they'd been leaning against opened and people jostled to get in. There were old people and children, men and women. A few of them looked like genuine passengers, neatly dressed and carrying a large suitcase. But the rest were hawkers and panhandlers. They fought their way down the aisle,

offering rice packages that were no longer warm, drinks, cigarettes and fried peanuts. Others held out their cupped hands to each passenger. They stood that way if they were ignored, until the passengers felt compelled to give them something. There were also buskers playing maracas or singing, although their voices were barely audible. They refused to move on until they got a handful of change.

Ananta gave a little money to each person who held out their hand. Not a lot, just change. Arimbi remembered that he'd prepared a lot of loose change before they boarded the train.

"If one of them happens to be a thug and you don't pay, you could be in danger. Better to be safe and have your change ready beforehand," he said softly to Arimbi.

There was a long whistle from the locomotive, then the train lurched forward again, throwing people off their balance. The iron wheels turned slowly. There was more commotion in the aisles as those who had just got on rushed for the exits. A few of the children took the short way out, jumping through the windows that no longer had panes in them. By the time the train was up to full speed, the aisles were empty and calm.

Arimbi and Ananta sat back down on the floor and reclined against the door. They didn't speak. They closed their eyes, wanting to sleep. Arimbi was just settling into slumber when the train shuddered again and she was thrown forward. All the passengers woke up. The train had stopped again. Outside it was still dark.

"We're giving way for the ghost train," Ananta said.

"What?"

"Just wait and see."

Arimbi waited for what seemed a long time. When the train

wasn't moving she felt stifled and nervous. Some of the passengers began wandering down the aisle. Some went to the toilet, others to the middle car in search of food. Others were asking around for why the train had stopped.

Suddenly there was rumbling sound that grew louder and louder. That must be the ghost train that Ananta mentioned, Arimbi thought. Through the window, she could see the outline of the long iron tube moving fast, incredibly fast. It was no ghost, but it was certainly a train, the same kind as the one she was on. Except that it was traveling so fast.

Ananta laughed. "That's the executive train. Later when we've got a lot of money, we'll take that train. It's nice. The seats are soft, it's air-conditioned, there's TVs. And it goes fast. You can sleep in it and not be disturbed all the time like here."

Arimbi flushed. She was ashamed at her own ignorance. A moment later she found the words to defend her lack of knowledge. "So it's a nice train, big deal. We'd probably still have to sleep on the floor because we wouldn't get seats."

"But it's different if you've got money. Just you wait, I'll buy you the most expensive ticket," Ananta said. They both laughed.

The train began moving again. They closed their eyes, but soon enough it happened all over again: the screeching halt, the invasion by the hawkers and beggars, the train moving off again, and another attempt to catch some sleep. Ananta was probably right, Arimbi thought: on the expensive train they would be able to sleep in peace throughout the journey.

It was three in the morning when the train stopped again. Not as many hawkers and beggars clambered aboard as before. The station where they'd stopped didn't sound as busy

as the previous ones. Arimbi stepped out of the toilet and looked outside. It was a small station with a few benches on which people were sleeping.

The baby began whining as he woke up. He was probably thirsty again. Arimbi gave the mother another bottle of water. But even after drinking it he continued to cry and only got louder.

"He's probably hot. Here, I'll take him for some air," the father said. He carried the baby to the doorway and rocked him in his arms while cooing to him. He took the baby outside, walked along the rails for a bit, then came back. He did this a few times. He'd just stepped out again when there was the sound of a loud crash.

"Watch out!" he shrieked.

"Aaaaahhh!" came the scream of another passenger inside the train car, followed by the sound of crying.

Everyone in the train car ran toward the source of the shouting. A young woman was holding her head while crying. There was blood flowing. The passenger next to her, her mother, was holding her while shouting, "Help! Help! Please help my daughter!"

A few of the passengers ran to the front of the train to tell the engineer. Four officials came to the scene, one of them carrying a first-aid kit. But when he saw the young woman's injuries, he didn't dare do a thing. One of them ran back to the front of the train, and returned a moment later, saying, "I think your daughter should get off here so she can be treated at a hospital. There's no other choice."

The two women cried. They got up without saying a word, the mother supporting and embracing her daughter. Two officials went with them as they left the train. Those inside

watched as they weaved through the benches and disappeared into the station.

A small crowd was still gathered where the women had been sitting. There were shards of broken glass on the floor, and a large rock beneath the seat. The young woman must have been hit by the rock and fragments of glass, Arimbi thought. People started talking about how the other windows were also broken. They said this had been going on for a long time. People would throw rocks at passing trains, for no apparent reason. Often the rocks would hit the body of the train, but sometimes they would hit a window and shatter the pane. And if there was someone sitting by the window, then it was their bad luck.

The train lurched forward and resumed its slow journey. The passengers went back to their places. The two recently vacated seats were left empty. Arimbi preferred to sit on the floor again rather than in the seats. She sat back down next to Ananta and leaned back against the door. Next to them was the husband and wife with the baby. They couldn't close their eyes again. All of them were thinking about the young woman hit by the rock. Only the baby was asleep, the father holding it tight.

Two officials walked past them. They went down the aisle all the way to the last train car, then came back. One of them stopped and asked, "New passengers, eh?" as he pointed to the couple next to Arimbi.

The man and his wife shook their heads.

"From Jakarta? How come I haven't seen you before? Where's your ticket stubs?"

"They don't have any, sir. Just like us," Arimbi said.

"Oh, in that case I missed you. You can pay the same as them," the official said, pointing at Arimbi and Ananta.

The man and his wife didn't say anything. Their faces went

pale. They were probably thinking about the horror stories people told of cruel train conductors who forced stowaways off the train while it was still moving. Some conductors weren't as bad and waited until the train had stopped before ejecting a stowaway. But trains didn't always stop at a station. The kind they were on now more often than not stopped in the middle of rice fields, in dark places without any signs. Those who were dumped there had to walk long distances to the nearest station, or at least to the nearest human habitation.

"Give me forty thousand for the both of you," the official said.

"I'm sorry, sir, we've run out of money. We just want to go home," the man stammered.

The conductor looked at the man, his wife, their baby and their bag. "How dare you get on a business-class train if you don't have the money?"

"The economy-class one had already left, sir. We couldn't catch it."

"If everyone without money could get on the business-class train, it'd be packed. That would make it no different from the economy-class train."

The husband and wife didn't say anything. They bowed their heads in fear. Arimbi imagined how bad the economy-class train was like if this train was already so full that they had to sit on the floor. And it wasn't just them, in every train car, people were sleeping on newspapers laid out on the aisles. And even from a distance Arimbi could smell the stench from the toilet. The only reason she was still sitting there was because she could lean against the door and not be in people's way. There was no water in the toilet. The urine and feces fell right through to the tracks below. If not, she could only imagine the

mound of dark yellow feces and urine-soaked floor. Some people took a handful of tissue paper and a bottle of water in with them to clean up. The used tissues and empty bottles piled up in a corner of the toilet, along with blood-soaked sanitary pads and soiled diapers. So how bad was it in the economy-class train?

"You know the rules about being on board a train without a ticket?" the conductor asked. The man and woman nodded.

"I should let you off here, make you jump," he went on. "But because of the baby, I'll be kind. You can get off at the next stop."

He walked off while saying, "Serves you right. What are you doing taking the business-class train when you're poor?"

The official disappeared from sight. The man and woman heaved a sigh of relief; at least they didn't have to jump from the moving train. Arimbi and Ananta were also relieved. "They're always like that. Just take it easy. They're just trying to frighten you," Ananta said.

The husband and wife seemed overjoyed upon hearing that. They felt the conductor wouldn't do anything awful to them, that he was just trying to teach them a lesson not to get on a train without a ticket.

The train kept going. Ananta said they were probably near Kebumen by now. The train would pull into Yogyakarta soon, and from there it was just twenty minutes to Klaten. Ananta and Arimbi didn't go back to sleep. He told her stories about the places they passed. He talked about the beautiful beaches in Yogyakarta. Arimbi listened while resting her head against his shoulder. Arimbi then pitched in with her own stories about places she knew of in Solo. There weren't that many. The

whole time she was there she spent most of time at college or in the dead-end alley.

The husband and wife next to them didn't sleep either. They remained silent, staring straight ahead, through the window in the door against which the five card players were now sleeping.

The train juddered again and Arimbi knew it was about to stop. By now she knew how to brace herself so that she wouldn't be thrown off-balance when the train stopped. Through the window she couldn't see a single light; it was pitch black. The train wasn't stopping at a station.

The conductor appeared again before them. He wasn't alone; this time there were two other officials behind him.

"You're getting off here!" he told the husband and wife.

"Don't, sir. We just want to go to Wates. It's only a little bit further," the man said. He sounded frightened. His wife was sobbing.

"Well, if it's so close, then you can get off here. You've got a nerve talking about it's so near. What were you doing the whole way from Jakarta?"

"We admit we did wrong, sir," the man said, his voice trembling. "But please, just this once, sir. For my child's sake!"

"Ah, now you're using your child as an excuse. Anyone can say that. Enough, get out now!"

The conductor strode to the door. Everyone scrambled out of his way. He opened the door. "Come on!" he said as he yanked on the man's arm.

"Don't! Don't! I'll pay for them!" Ananta suddenly shouted. He quickly took out his wallet and took out a fifty-thousand-rupiah bill. The conductor took it.

"So you guys know each other, huh?" he asked. His tone was suddenly much friendlier.

Ananta nodded. "Yes, we're friends," he said without thinking. He just wanted the conductor to go away.

The conductor dug around in his pocket, then said, "It seems I don't have change." He turned to the two other officials and asked, "Do you have ten thousand?"

Both of them shook their heads.

"Just keep it, sir," Ananta said.

"Really?"

Ananta nodded.

"Well, thanks. I'll consider it the fine. Those are the rules, you know," he said.

Ananta didn't reply.

The three officials left, and the husband and wife wouldn't stop thanking Ananta. The train continued on its journey, stopping at every station. Arimbi counted three stations since the couple were almost kicked off the train. At the fourth station, they stood up, ready to disembark. They'd reached Wates Station.

The husband and his wife said their goodbyes and thanks once again. Then they hurried off the train and were soon out of sight. Arimbi and Ananta didn't see them again.

"I guess we were destined to lose that fifty thousand," Ananta chuckled.

"It's alright. Those poor people," Arimbi said.

"There are lots of people like that..." Ananta said, his words echoing. "That's why we should have a lot of money so that we can help when something happens."

Arimbi nodded. She was thinking about a lot of people.

The village where Ananta's parents lived wasn't much different from Arimbi's village. From Klaten Station they had to take a small bus an hour and a half's drive out of the town, away from the wide, paved roads and onto the narrow, dusty country paths. There was no trace here of the bustle of the traffic and shops of the town of Klaten. They got off the bus at a place that appeared to be a market, then took motorbike taxis for a fare of five thousand rupiah each.

A woman was sweeping the front yard when they finally pulled up outside Ananta's family's home. She dropped her broom and ran toward Ananta. This was Mariani, his younger sister, usually called Ani. She was two years younger than Ananta, but her countenance and her posture made her appear much older. Her face was creased, her hair unkempt, and her belly, hips and thighs were twice as large as Arimbi's. Perhaps that was because she'd had children, Arimbi thought.

Ani had two children. The eldest was a boy, seven, who was now in second grade. The youngest was a girl who had just turned three. Her husband was a contract worker at the municipal water company. His job every day was to go from house to house, recording the numbers on the water meters and issuing a chit that people would use to pay their water bills.

Ani had never held a job. Every day she helped her mother make popsicles that they sold outside the village's grade school. That had been Ananta's idea. Seeing his father out of work, he had bought a freezer, and the business was still running. They earned enough from selling popsicles to live on, in addition to

the money that Ananta sent back, which was never more than three hundred thousand a month.

The house they lived in had been handed down from Ananta's grandfather. It was a traditional *joglo* house, with unplastered brick walls and an old, moss-covered roof. It still had a dirt floor. There were only two bedrooms in the house, but the family never slept in them. Every night they slept together on a mat rolled out on the floor of the front room, in front of the fourteen-inch TV. The only things in the bedrooms were the wardrobes and piles of clothes that needed to be ironed. It seemed the bedrooms were only ever occupied for lovemaking, Arimbi thought. She smiled. She suddenly had an urge to make love in one of the bedrooms.

But they would only be staying for one night. Arimbi didn't talk much with Ananta's parents. They were friendly, but not the talkative kind. They showed their acceptance of Arimbi with just a smile and occasional offers of food. They only asked her one question, where she was from, and after that they didn't seem to need to know more. When Arimbi handed out the gifts of shirts and snacks, Ananta's parents just smiled and thanked her. Only the look in their eyes and the change in their faces showed how happy they were. It was different with Ani, who expressed joy at everything.

Arimbi talked a lot with Ani, even though neither of them actually said much. Ani was like a kindergarten pupil, asking about all kinds of things in a state of wonderment. Arimbi answered all her questions about Jakarta: about how it felt to work as a civil servant there, and about the things she saw on television. Ani would compare that with her own memories of the capital, where she lived until she finished middle school some ten years ago.

Arimbi was still regaling Ani with stories of the big city late into the night. When Ananta woke her up early the next morning, she felt as though she'd only just gone to bed. They had to leave for Arimbi's parents' village with Ananta's parents. The sun had only just peeped over the horizon when they left. The four of them walked to the market that also served as a bus stop, along the same road that a day earlier Arimbi had traveled using a motorbike taxi.

The sight that greeted her now was different from the day before. The sun hadn't reached its scorching heights yet, and the air was cold, with the occasional breeze. The dusty road from the day before was now a carpet of dew-drenched grass beneath Arimbi's feet. There was no sound of engines; only of the cicadas in the bamboo groves, and once in a while a call from a neighbor out sweeping their yard.

This early in the morning the small buses plying the route to the Klaten bus terminal had a friendlier air about them. It felt cool inside the old buses, and everyone got a seat. All the windows were open wide, and everyone could feel the clean breeze free of dust. There wasn't the stench of sweat just yet, only the smell of fresh vegetables packed into bamboo baskets, to be sold once they reached the town.

At the Klaten terminal, Arimbi, Ananta and his parents got onto a bigger bus. It was six o'clock, but the terminal was already full of buskers. Some were old, but most were no more than children. Arimbi didn't remember seeing this many buskers when she went home to Ponorogo or to Solo. Back then, the buskers really did sing and play the guitar. One song they sang that Arimbi particularly liked was "*Kemesraan*". The

¹ Intimacy

busker who usually sang it was a tall, skinny man, with hair that fell below his shoulders. The buskers now, though, simply mumbled a few lines, and the only instruments they played were maracas made with bottle tops. Most just shoved out their hand and put on a pained expression. There were also burly panhandlers who glared at the bus passengers and stepped on their feet if they didn't shell out any change. And all of these people were on board that Arimbi was on this morning. It was no different from the night on board the train.

The bus trundled east at high speed, going past rice fields and slicing through the urban sprawl of Solo and Sragen, following the border between Central Java and East Java, which was lined on either side with dense teak forests. This was the first time Ananta and his parents had ventured east. None of them slept during the journey. They stared through the windows of the bus, each lost in their own thoughts.

It was almost midday when they finally reached their destination. Arimbi's parents had been waiting all day. They had prepared three grilled chickens for lunch, which they ate together in silence. Arimbi's father or mother occasionally spoke just to offer more food to their guests.

The real talking began once the food had been cleared away and coffee and sweet tea served. Ananta's father recited words that he had already rehearsed, his head bowed and staring at his knees rather than looking at the people in front of him. This was his proposal for Arimbi's marriage to his son. Arimbi's father responded to the proposal, also with polished though stilted words that he had memorized long before his daughter had come home.

The betrothal gifts were handed over. Arimbi had brought

them over from Jakarta and arranged them neatly in Klaten. She knew that this was the kind of thing that became the talk of the village. News of a proposal always spread like wildfire. There was no end to the amazement if the groom-to-be handed over an expensive gift. And if the gift was considered unworthy, it would generate gossip that would only die down a long time later. Besides preparing food, Arimbi had also wrapped up a gold bracelet. She had arranged it all, but made it look as though it was Ananta who was handing over the gifts for the proposal.

There would be a large gathering at Arimbi's parents' house that night to give thanks. Everyone would pray for Arimbi and Ananta's marriage to be blessed and long-lived. During the course of the thanksgiving, the couple would be married by Mr. Modin. Arimbi's father had arranged everything. Before leaving Jakarta, Arimbi had sent him photocopies of Ananta's identity card and family card so that her father could apply for their marriage certificate.

All afternoon the house was a hive of activity as the neighborhood women helped with the preparations. The kitchen was packed. The sound of the pestle pounding on the mortar and of food sizzling as it fried mingled with the women's chatter.

Arimbi took refuge in her room. She tried to get some rest so that she would look fresh for the big moment. But her mind rebelled against her, refusing to be drawn into the unconscious. The sounds of the women in the kitchen felt so close that she couldn't close her eyes.

Suddenly there was a knock on her door, followed by her father's voice calling, "Mbi... Wake up, child! You've got to attend to the marriage certificate."

Arimbi quickly got up, straightened her clothes, and opened the door. She followed her father to the front room where two men were already waiting. Arimbi greeted them. The younger one, dressed in a long-sleeved batik shirt and a *peci*², was Widodo, a village councilor. Arimbi remembered hearing about him from Narno, about how he'd paid forty million to get the job.

The other man was much older than Widodo; he was even older than Arimbi's father. He wasn't from the village. She heard him introduced as an official from the Religious Affairs Office – someone with the power to marry couples and issue marriage certificates.

"It's like this, Miss Arimbi: There's a problem with the marriage certificate. The groom's ID card isn't from this village," Widodo said.

Arimbi frowned. She didn't know how applying for a marriage certificate worked. When she'd spoken to her father by phone from Jakarta, all he'd said was that he needed photocopies of Ananta's ID card and family card and everything would be fine. That was how their neighbors did it too.

"So what can I do?" Arimbi asked.

"You need to have a letter from his municipality so that we can issue the marriage certificate here."

"But they're getting married tonight and everyone's been invited. Why do they have to get the letter now?" Arimbi's father said.

Everyone fell silent. Arimbi considered the consequences of their getting married without a marriage certificate. For a

² A brimless, black felt cap with a flat top

moment she blamed her father for insisting that it would all be "easy, easy", without finding out what documents they needed to prepare before they left Jakarta. But she quickly turned the blame onto herself for not finding out and for believing in her illiterate father who knew nothing.

"There's actually an easy way out of this," Widodo said, breaking the silence. "As a fellow villager I can help. But there's going to be an additional cost for us to take care of it at the subdistrict office and the Religious Affairs Office."

Arimbi was relieved. So it was the same everywhere: everything could be resolved with money. Eighty-six, she thought in her heart. She understood this kind of arrangement. All that mattered to her was that there would be no more problems. "So how much more must I pay?"

"Just three hundred thousand, miss, and everything will be sorted. You'll get the certificate tonight, in time for the marriage ceremony," Widodo said.

Arimbi nodded, but inside she cursed. Her father had said that others usually paid just a hundred and fifty thousand for a marriage certificate, and that included the services of the cleric performing the ceremony and the cost of typing up the certificate. Now she was being asked to pay double that. But no matter, as long as everything was settled, she thought. Besides, she would get it all back again in no time in Jakarta.

The ceremony was over and done with quickly. Ananta repeated the vow uttered by the cleric, then it was Arimbi's father's turn. Widodo handed them the two marriage certificates, which both Arimbi and Ananta signed. It was all done. They were now husband and wife.

They no longer had to rent two rooms. Ananta moved all his belongings into Arimbi's room, then handed back the key to his room to the boarding house's caretaker. Arimbi was startled at the sight of all that he brought. Her wardrobe, already full, would have to squeeze in even more clothes. Arimbi cleared out the wardrobe and folded her clothes up smaller, even rolling some of them, to make room for Ananta's clothes. But there still wasn't enough space for all his clothes. They decided to leave it in his large duffel bag which they placed in a corner of the room, against the wall next to the bathroom door.

There wasn't any space for Ananta's TV either. Besides, what good were two TVs in a room this small, Arimbi thought. So they took the extra TV to a flea market and sold it for a hundred and fifty thousand.

Every day their dirty clothes would pile up behind the door.

Before Ananta moved in, Arimbi would hang all of her dirty clothes on the pegs behind the door until Saturday, when she would do the laundry. But now, with twice as many dirty clothes as before, there weren't enough pegs to hang them on. Every day after coming home from work, Ananta would simply fling his dirty clothes behind the door for Arimbi to wash the coming Saturday. Ananta never actually asked his wife to wash his clothes for him, but Arimbi couldn't stand to see him let the clothes pile up. And pile up they would, unless she immediately took them into the bathroom, soaked them in a bucket of soapy water, then wash them as best she could.

It was a chore, but it didn't become a problem. That was because Arimbi was happy. Marriage had served to round out Ananta's virtues in her eyes. Everything he said and did turned into grains of comfort and familiarity that Arimbi feasted on the whole day, from the moment she opened her eyes to the moment she closed them again in the darkness.

Arimbi loved the way Ananta greeted her when they woke up, their bodies still hidden beneath the covers. She relished going to work each day, because it meant being escorted downstairs by her husband and then holding on to him tightly on the back of the motorbike. Arimbi yearned for the end of the day when her husband would pick her up at the office. He would smile then gently ask, "Do you want to go straight home or stop by someplace else first?" Arimbi enjoyed it when he pampered her, stroking her and massaging her back and legs as they lay back in bed, talking before going to sleep. And of course Arimbi never forgot how her entire body rejoiced when they fused into one inseparable being.

Arimbi was deliriously happy, and she felt she should give everything to make Ananta happy. Washing his clothes was a

small burden, too small to even count. Arimbi did everything and gave all she had to pay back what Ananta had given her. It wasn't something that could be counted. She only wanted for them not to be on an even footing, for the both of them to truly share in the happiness that she was feeling. That, at least, was Arimbi's way of giving her love.

She knew what Ananta didn't have: money. His salary went to paying for fuel, his meals at work, and sending money back home to his parents. He also paid the rent for the boarding room, which meant he always ran out of money before his next payday. Arimbi covered for the both of them during those times, without Ananta ever having to say, "Let me borrow some money," as he once did when they were still dating. They knew each other. Besides, for Arimbi there was no distinction between her money and his. It was their money, for their life and happiness together.

Arimbi also realized that their boarding room wasn't the best place to stay for long if they wanted to remain happy. She wanted a place with her own kitchen, with a blue-flamed stove on which she could cook all kinds of tasty dishes for her husband.

And like other women she knew, she wanted to be able to decorate her own home, to create a small haven for her family. She could already imagine the blue curtains she would hang up in the house. She would have a white couch with blue throw pillows to match the curtains. She also yearned to sleep on pink bed linen, which she would buy the moment they had a new bed with a wider, softer mattress.

Arimbi imagined having flowers of all colors. Her hands itched to have them, plant them and pick them when they

bloomed. The flowers would surround the house, growing in the front yard, by the sides, and in the back yard.

More than any of that, though, Arimbi wanted a child. Would her child have to sleep in this cramped little room? She wanted her child to have the same experience growing as she did, running in the yard and playing in wide open spaces.

But for all that, they would need to save money. Arimbi was well aware that she couldn't count on her husband's salary for that. It was up to her to earn enough to make all their little happinesses that much more perfect.

* * *

The text message from Mrs. Danti arrived in the middle of the night. "Tomorrow at nine you'll meet a lawyer at the Tebet Grilled Chicken restaurant. Tell him everything goes through you."

"What lawyer, ma'am? Which case?" Arimbi texted back.

"Go straight to the VIP room. It's a corruption case. Tell him you can't if it's less than two. For the judge it'll be one and a half, minimum. The rest is for us. Everything will go through you."

Arimbi didn't reply. She closed her eyes and thought about how much her cut would be the next day. It was bound to be bigger than what she usually received at the courthouse canteen, she thought.

The restaurant appeared deserted when Arimbi arrived. There were only two cars in the parking lot. Arimbi went in but couldn't see a single guest. There were only a few waiters going about their business. The restaurant wasn't even open yet.

One of the waiters came up to Arimbi. She asked for the VIP room. She followed him to the back of the restaurant and into a private room. There were two men already seated inside. Arimbi didn't recognize either of them.

"Mrs. Danti, right? I'm Sasmita," one of the men said as he held out his hand to Arimbi.

"No, no, I'm Arimbi, Mrs. Danti's assistant. She asked me to come here."

"Oh, yes, she said so yesterday. She said she was out of town. I just hoped she would have been able to make it," Sasmita said with a laugh. "This is my friend, Rudi." The other man stepped closer and shook Arimbi's hand with a firm grasp. Both men were very friendly, like the lawyers that Arimbi usually met at the courthouse.

They sat down at the table. A waiter brought Arimbi a drinks menu. The food was already laid out on the table.

"So what did Mrs. Danti say, miss? It's all settled, right?" Sasmita asked.

"She says it has to be two. She can't go any lower," Arimbi said. She was simply repeating what Mrs. Danti had said in the text message, without asking what the case was about.

"Oh... two. But it's all settled, right?"

"If Mrs. Danti says it's settled, then it's definitely settled," Arimbi said, half-playfully.

Sasmita laughed. "Yes, yes... We've heard a lot about Mrs. Danti's powers."

Rudi laughed, then said, "We trust in Mrs. Danti and in you. So, two... Well, if it's got to be two, then it's a deal."

"So what's the next step, miss?" Sasmita asked.

"All the deals will go through me, Mrs. Danti said. This is

a case that's just been filed, right? The first hearing is next week, if I'm not mistaken."

"Yup, that's right. Who's the judge, miss?"

"I don't know yet, either. It's Mrs. Danti who usually arranges that."

"Great! We're counting on you and Mrs. Danti," Sasmita said, laughing again. "Mrs. Danti's reputation precedes her."

"Oh, really?" Arimbi was curious. "Have you known her long?"

"Well, I haven't actually met her myself," Sasmita laughed. "Rudi knows her, though. He was the one who contacted her and asked for her help," he said as he patted Rudi on the shoulder. Rudi smiled and nodded.

"So what is this case about? I don't know anything. Mrs. Danti hasn't told me yet."

"The usual kind of case... about a retired official. He wasn't even an important official, just a director general. But fate dealt him a bad hand."

"Did he embezzle a lot?"

"It was project money... he was said to have taken ten. But that's small. A lot of others take a lot more. He just got unlucky."

Arimbi nodded, not asking any more. She was imagining what she could do with ten billion rupiah. There was nothing she couldn't buy with that kind of money, and she'd have plenty left over for her children and grandchildren. If she ever got caught embezzling ten billion, all she'd have to do was pay a bribe of two billion and everything would be fine. And there would be plenty left over, she thought.

The room went silent for a moment. Sasmita didn't say anything. He was finishing off the chicken on his plate. Rudi,

who hadn't spoken that much, was fiddling with his mobile phone. Arimbi had finished her food and a glass of guava juice that she'd ordered earlier. She got up and told Sasmita and Rudi that she needed to go to the bathroom.

Arimbi left the VIP room and found the restaurant had suddenly filled up. All the tables near the VIP room were occupied. She hurried to the bathroom in the far corner. One of the diners, a woman, also got up and they wound their way to the bathroom together.

Arimbi returned to the VIP room a short while later. Sasmita was done eating. He was smoking while watching the TV. Rudi was still busy with his phone, but put it away as soon as Arimbi sat back down across from him.

"Let's do it now; I have an appointment," he told Sasmita. Sasmita nodded. He picked up the briefcase next to him, opened it for a moment, then shut it again.

"I'm giving this to you now, miss. Please make sure Mrs. Danti gets it, and that everything is settled."

Arimbi nodded. She took the briefcase that Sasmita was holding out. "There's two inside. Please count it," Sasmita said.

Arimbi raised the briefcase up. Her hands suddenly went cold, her heart froze for a moment and her eyes went wide. She had never held so much money before in all her life. Two billion. Even if she worked until she retired her salary would never amount to that much.

She put the briefcase on the table and slowly opened it. There was a stack of hundred-thousand-rupiah notes at one end, and a stack of dollar bills at the other end. She felt the money, caressing it slowly and carefully. Her body, chilled just a moment before, was now warm. Her eyes went from feeling

dry to feeling moist. The money seemed to flow into her body, through her eyes, her ears, nose, down her throat, branching out to every corner of her soul. But, no, that wasn't it. What really happened was Arimbi's soul rose slowly, went up her throat and exited her body before melding with the money. Ahh... if only all this was mine, she thought.

Arimbi went straight from the restaurant to Mrs. Danti's house, which was also in the Tebet area and not too far from the restaurant. She wondered why Mrs. Danti hadn't gone to meet them herself.

"I'm not feeling very well. Besides, I had a lot of other things to do," Mrs. Danti said as they sat on the back porch, looking out over a spacious yard with a neatly trimmed lawn. The house itself was big and stately at two stories high. Each room was painted a different color. The front room was done out in light blue, from the walls to the curtains to the throw pillows. A large aquarium stood in the room. In the living room, the chosen color was red. There were all kinds of furnishings in a shade of red that matched the walls. The living room led out to the back porch.

Mrs. Danti's children were at school and her husband was working. The only other person Arimbi had seen was the maid who answered the door.

"So how was it, all sorted?" Mrs. Danti asked.

Arimbi nodded. She put the briefcase on the table. Mrs. Danti quickly cleared away a flower vase that was on the table and pulled the briefcase toward her. She opened it and touched the money. "Did you count it? It's two, right?"

"I counted, ma'am. It's two."

"Good. You didn't tell anyone, did you?"

Arimbi shook her head. "No, ma'am."

"Good. Keep it secret. Don't let anyone find out. The reason I asked you to go was because I can trust you to keep a secret."

"Yes, ma'am."

"I need to be more careful now, Mbi. A lot of people know me. If someone sees me meeting a lawyer and starts blabbing, there could be trouble. Everyone's out to save face these days. They're telling on others left and right, like they're clean themselves, when in fact all their money comes from stealing."

"Oh..." Arimbi nodded again. She understood now why Mrs. Danti had sent her in her place. Barely anyone knew her. There would be no speculative talk. Mrs. Danti had also said she trusted Arimbi, which made her blush.

"This will be Judge Dewabrata's case, Mbi. I've already told them that it'll all be taken care of. I've done this sort of thing with him lots of times. He's alright, doesn't ask for much. The others are more demanding," Mrs. Danti said.

"But there are going to be three judges hearing the case, ma'am."

"Yes, but the two others will follow the presiding judge. Each of them will get five hundred," Mrs. Danti said as she pulled out several hundred-thousand-rupiah bills. She gave them to Arimbi, "Here's your cut. Not bad for a new wife. You can save up to buy a house."

Arimbi's face lit up. Her eyes shone and she couldn't help grinning widely. "Wow, ma'am, thanks a lot. I've never even seen this much money before."

"Just remember not to say anything."

Suddenly the doorbell rang.

"That's strange that someone's calling at this time. Put the

money back in your bag, Mbi,” Mrs. Danti said. She snapped the briefcase shut and slid it under the table.

The maid who had opened the door for Arimbi earlier came out to the porch and said, “There’s some people looking for you, ma’am, they say they’re from the KPK¹.”

“What? KPK? Did you tell them I was in?”

The maid nodded.

“Damn! Here, take this briefcase out back! Put it under your mattress. Lock your room and don’t come out until I call for you.”

Mrs. Danti went to the front room to meet the visitors, while Arimbi went to the living room. She wanted to know why the KPK had suddenly shown up here. She had often heard the name mentioned on TV recently. They’d arrested a governor for corruption. Arimbi suddenly shuddered: what if they were here to arrest Mrs. Danti?

“What’s the meaning of this? How dare you raid my home?” Mrs. Danti could be heard saying in a high tone. She sounded angry.

“We’ve got a warrant to search the premises, ma’am.” It was a man’s voice.

Mrs. Danti still wouldn’t yield. “Yes, but what reason do you have for searching my home? Don’t try taking any liberties. I know the law, too.”

“You can file your objections later, ma’am. For now, we have our search to conduct.”

Arimbi heard footsteps approaching from the front room. Mrs. Danti had given up. She let them in, but followed them

¹ Indonesia’s Corruption Eradication Commission (*Komisi Pemberantasan Korupsi*)

and kept objecting, even as she tried to make a phone call. One of the men came up to Arimbi while the other three passed through the living room and split up to search the rest of the house.

"Are you a relative of Mrs. Danti's?" the KPK official asked Arimbi.

She shook her head. "No, I'm her office assistant."

"And what business do you have here?"

"It's work-related. She wasn't feeling well so I came here."

The official looked at her searchingly. His gaze took in every part of her, from top to bottom. Arimbi was flustered. She was scared and embarrassed all at once.

"May I check your bag?" the official asked as he pointed at Arimbi's black rucksack.

"Why do you want to check my bag? It's mine. I only have a few papers from work and my personal things," Arimbi said, her voice rising. Her heart was racing and her face was drained.

"I just want to check," the official said as he stepped closer to Arimbi and took the bag from her with both hands.

Arimbi didn't put up a fight. She let him have the bag and he immediately unzipped it. Arimbi's legs trembled. She wanted to disappear into the floor and never be seen again. The official was bound to see the money in her bag.

"This is an awful lot of money. What's it for?" the official asked in a careful tone. To Arimbi, it sounded as though he was mocking her, like she was a thief caught red-handed with stolen goods.

"Er... that's my own money, sir. It's nothing," she said without thinking. She immediately regretted it. Why did she say it was hers when no one could possibly believe her? She

should have said it was from Mrs. Danti to give to X or Y. Arimbi bit her lip, cursing herself.

"You just sit still and don't go anywhere. We've got people guarding the place from the outside too. I'm taking your bag with me," the official said.

He left Arimbi and joined the others. They went into each room, rifling through cupboards and checking the ceiling panels.

"Enough, sir, enough! There's nothing in my house," Mrs. Danti shouted.

Two of the officials returned to the living room. They took apart the TV cabinet and the bookshelf. Then they went back into the rooms they had already checked. They found nothing.

"That's the maid's room, sir. She's sick," Mrs. Danti could be heard saying from the back of the house. She was trying to stop the officials from going into the room.

There was a loud banging as they knocked on the door. The officials didn't care what Mrs. Danti said. "Open the door."

The banging went on for some time. Arimbi covered her face with her hands as tears rolled down her cheeks. She thought about the briefcase hidden underneath the maid's mattress.

There was the sound of footsteps approaching the living room. One of the officials swept through carrying the briefcase that Arimbi had brought over not long before. Another official went up to Arimbi and said, "You're both under arrest."

Sitting side by side in the back of a car with its windows meshed up, the two women didn't say a word. Arimbi was no longer crying; her tears seemed to have dried up. She couldn't think. Next to her, Mrs. Danti was staring blankly through the window. Arimbi couldn't tell what she was thinking.

The car pulled into the driveway of a building near the Monas park. Through the window, Arimbi could see the golden flame at the top of the monument.

The car stopped in front of the main entrance to the building. The official sitting in the front passenger seat got down and opened the back door for Mrs. Danti. The convoy of cars that had followed them now drove past and out of sight.

Mrs. Danti got out slowly and Arimbi followed her. As they stood together, a horde of people who had been waiting inside the lobby of the building mobbed them. They were reporters. Dozens of cameras were aimed at the women's faces. Everyone was speaking at the same time, asking questions, but Arimbi couldn't make out anything from the din. It was a cacophony, and the longer it went on the more ear-splitting and headache-inducing it became.

The officials who had arrested them tried to escort them into the building through the sea of reporters. But the reporters were a feisty bunch and tried to close in on them, their voices rising into shouts. The cameras were so close they were almost touching Mrs. Danti and Arimbi in the face. The women plodded on, covering their faces with their hands. They squeezed through the mob, following the officials in front of them.

"Hey, don't get rough!" someone shouted.

Suddenly there was the sound of a punch as a reporter hit a security guard trying to get the crowd under control. An argument broke out and the other reporters immediately homed in on the new commotion. The officials told Mrs. Danti and Arimbi to run for it. They entered the building unseen.

It was eight at night when Ananta arrived at the building next to the Monas park. His face was pale and his movements awkward. He passed through the people still gathered outside the building, many of them carrying cameras, and went up to the security guard at the door. They spoke for a moment, then both entered the building.

Ananta met another official, who escorted him to a room and asked him to wait. Ananta sat in the corner, placed his elbows on the table and covered his face with his hands. His face was flushed and his eyes were puffy. Tears began streaming down his cheeks.

He was startled when the door opened again. Arimbi stood in the doorway with an official. The official stepped out of the room and shut the door to give the husband and wife some privacy.

Arimbi ran to Ananta and hugged him from the side as she cried. Ananta wrapped his arm around her body and stroked her shoulder without saying anything. Both of them were crying.

Finally, in between sobs, Arimbi said, "I'm going to jail."

Ananta didn't answer. He tightened his grip on her body. He tried with all his strength to stop crying. His loud sobbing subsided and eventually gave way to just a stream of tears. His mouth was clenched shut. He wanted with all his heart to tell his wife that everything would be alright. But he couldn't. Everything would not be alright. He began sobbing again, drowning in the sorrow of the woman he loved.

It was after midnight when Arimbi and Mrs. Danti left the building. They were about to spend their first of who knew

how many nights in jail. They would be there until at least their trial was over and they were acquitted. But was that even a possibility? No one knew. They were both charged with taking a bribe and conspiring to pervert the course of justice by serving as the link between a corruption suspect and the court that was about to try him. The evidence was the stacks of money.

The car they were in pulled into the driveway of the police headquarters, not far from the courthouse where Arimbi worked. The sound of the siren pierced the night air. The police officers on duty snapped to attention. The car stopped in front of a tall iron gate. The women got out and followed an official inside, into a kind of waiting room. Mrs. Danti's husband was there, along with three women, her brother and a lawyer. They had brought her some food, two suitcases of clothes and a thick quilt. Ananta showed up soon after. He'd only brought takeout food.

"I'm sorry, Mbi, I forgot to bring your clothes," he said softly.

"It's okay," Arimbi said as she pressed his hands in hers. She didn't want anything right now.

Arimbi and Mrs. Danti spent the night in a small room less than half the size of Arimbi's boarding room. They lay on a thin mattress placed over a mat. It was hot and stuffy inside. There was no fan, and the mosquitos never stopped coming. Neither of them slept all night, but they didn't speak a word. Arimbi suddenly grew angry with the woman beside her. It was because of Mrs. Danti that she was now banged up in this rotten cell. But the rage disappeared as quickly as it flared up, drowned out by sorrow, desperation and the memories of Mrs. Danti's enticing promises.

Early morning a guard came to their cell and said that Mrs. Danti's family had come to visit. Mrs. Danti straightened her hair and rubbed the sleep from her eyes. She hadn't gone to the toilet all night, disgusted by the idea of having to go to a jail toilet soiled with other detainees' waste. She preferred to hold it in.

Arimbi couldn't hold out as long as Mrs. Danti. The toilet was next to their cell and was used by the women in the nearby cells. Arimbi went in right after one of these other women came out. She could already smell the urine and feces, even though she was several steps from the door. She went forward hesitantly, pushing open the rusty metal door. A hole in the floor served as the toilet. Next to it was a waist-high tub with water, both for washing after taking a dump and for bathing. The water was brown. Arimbi closed the door, and the room went pitch black. She felt for the bolt and locked the door. She then felt for the light switch but couldn't find it. In the dark, the smell of feces stinging her nostrils, Arimbi squatted and emptied her own bowels. She cried.

A guard called her as she emerged from the toilet. She had a visitor, the guard said. It must be Ananta, Arimbi thought. She walked quickly, hoping to finish her crying in her husband's arms.

Ananta was sitting on his own on a long bench. Further down the bench, Mrs. Danti was eating breakfast with her family. She looked more cheerful. She was also chattering away, occasionally laughing.

Ananta began unwrapping the package he'd brought. It was padang rice, the same as the night before. "I didn't know what to get," he said.

"This is good," Arimbi said. She unwrapped the rest of it and they ate together.

"Did you get some sleep last night?"

Arimbi nodded. But as she lowered her head to eat again her tears began falling. She couldn't help it.

Ananta saw it and stroked his wife's head. "Just be patient, Mbi. This is a test. It won't be long."

Arimbi wiped her tears away and tried to smile as she said, "Yes, I'm alright. I just missed you. I'm used to having you there when I sleep."

She was trying to be light-hearted and playful, but the words had the opposite effect on Ananta. He went glassy-eyed, and soon began tearing up. He wiped the tears away hastily.

"You need to get a lawyer, Mbi. But you know I don't know about this kind of thing. Do you know anyone who can help?"

"I haven't tried. I'll try calling around later. But they've taken my phone away."

"Do you know anyone by name, so I can go to their office?"

"Give me some time to remember."

"I'll be back in the afternoon. Give me the name then. Is there anything you want me to bring you?"

"I need a fan. But can you bring it in here?"

Ananta nodded. "Yes, as long as you grease some palms."

Arimbi laughed. "Eighty-six? You can still eighty-six in here?"

"Sure! Who doesn't enjoy money?"

Mrs. Danti looked more cheerful when she got back to the cell. She called out to Arimbi, who was sleeping. "Here, Mbi, I've got lots of cake."

"Yes, ma'am. Thanks, but I'm full right now." Why was Mrs. Danti so good to her, Arimbi thought. She wanted to be angry at her and curse her.

"Oh, Mbi, you'll be on your own here tonight. I'm moving."

"Moving? You're being released?"

"No. That'd be great, though, if I was released right away. No, I'm just moving to another cell."

"Moving where, ma'am? Why are you moving?"

"Still somewhere in this jail. I don't know where, though. All I know is that it's better. I'd be stressed out if I had to spend another night here."

"You mean you can do that, ma'am, just ask to be moved?"

"Yes, as long as you have the money. My lawyer's taking care of it. Five million a month."

"Huh? Five million?"

"It is expensive, but what can I do? It's better than not being able to sleep each night and having to hold it in every time I need to go to the toilet."

Arimbi thought of the toilet and could almost smell it again. She saw the brown water and the other detainees' feces clinging to the sides of the hole, and also the pile of blood-soaked sanitary pads behind the door.

"Can I move too, ma'am?" Arimbi asked slowly.

"How? Do you have five million a month?"

"I mean, can I come with you? I just don't want to be here anymore."

"Goodness, Mbi. It's not that I don't want to help you, but they're the ones who make the rules, not me. In here it's all about the money. You can't just do as you please. And I can't pay for you."

Mrs. Danti's words were like a stake driven right through

Arimbi's heart. Her anger boiled over, and everything that she'd kept bottled up, everything she felt, came bubbling to the surface.

"If it wasn't for you I wouldn't have ended up in this place," Arimbi spat out.

"Hey, watch what you say! You were in on it as much as I was. You seemed pleased enough to get your fifty million!"

"What fifty million, ma'am? There's no money, they've taken it all. And now I've got to suffer for it."

"That's the risk, Mbi. You think I'm not suffering?" Mrs. Danti said in a softer tone.

But Arimbi couldn't quell her emotions. Her tone was still high when she said, "You deliberately made me your patsy, didn't you? You set me up, right?"

"You're out of order, Mbi! I wanted to help you, to spread the wealth. You think I don't know how you act around all those lawyers? Don't pretend to be so clean!"

Arimbi couldn't speak. It was as though someone had stuffed a rag in her mouth, leaving her unable to talk or even breathe. Their argument ended there. They didn't speak to each other after that. Arimbi immersed herself in her thoughts. She was thinking about which lawyer she could ask for help. Mrs. Danti was busy making phone calls and sending text messages. She even managed to get her phone back, Arimbi thought.

That afternoon was the last time they would be together. Mrs. Danti left the cell with all of her belongings and didn't say a word. Arimbi looked away, loath to see the other woman. The only time they met after that was when the KPK brought them in for questioning and they found themselves sitting side by side in the same car for the trip from the jail and back. They didn't speak or look at each other.

It was the first Wednesday of September. Arimbi was bathed and neatly dressed early in the morning. She wore a long-sleeved white blouse and black pants. It was the first day of her trial. It wasn't a relief because there was still a long way to go until a verdict was delivered. And even then, she couldn't be sure of a favorable outcome.

But at least the trial would be a change for Arimbi. For the past month she had been shuttled back and forth from the jail to the KPK building, where she would sit in a closed room and answer the same questions over and over. Adrian, the young lawyer she had once helped, volunteered to be her attorney. Arimbi was hesitant at first to ask for his help, but his was the only name card that Ananta could find in their room. The phone numbers of the other lawyers she knew were all on her mobile phone, and she didn't know where it was.

Ananta was the one who went to meet Adrian at his office.

In his confused state he didn't know what to say beyond introducing himself as the husband of Arimbi, the court clerk. But Adrian knew all about it. The news of the arrest of the two court officials and two lawyers spread fast. Adrian didn't waste time offering his services for Arimbi. And before Ananta could say anything, Adrian added that he would do it for free. He said he saw in Arimbi a comrade in arms. He also said he owed her a debt of gratitude.

When Ananta told Arimbi what Adrian had said, she smiled. What lawyer would ever admit to owing a debt of gratitude? They were both in it for the money. Both knew the score and both wanted things resolved.

Arimbi knew Adrian had his own reasons for volunteering to take on her case for no fee. Every corruption case investigated and prosecuted by the KPK received immense public attention. Adrian wanted to be famous. He wanted his name in the newspapers every day. That would get people flocking to use his services, for which, as a lawyer with experience in a corruption case, he could set a high fee. But Arimbi didn't care. She needed a lawyer and she didn't have the money to pay for one. Besides, they would both benefit from this arrangement. Everything was sorted and understood. Eighty-six, but with no cash involved this time.

Adrian accompanied her to all the questioning sessions at the KPK building. He also coached her on answering questions from the press and crafted an alibi for her. "Whatever they ask, just say you don't know. You were just ordered by your boss to pick up a parcel, but you didn't know what it was. The fifty million in your bag was a loan from Mrs. Danti. Your father was sick back in the village and needed the money for surgery," Adrian told her over and over.

Arimbi didn't object. She memorized and recited everything that Adrian told her. All she wanted was to go free, to get out of that desolate place.

It was the sight of Ananta that cut her most deeply during her time in jail. He came to see her every day, often at midday when he would bring her food and try to amuse her with his banter. He spent his lunch hours at the jail, which often clashed with his own job of surveying prospective motorbike buyers. Arimbi often told him he didn't need to come every day. And each time he insisted and said, "There's nothing I can do to help except this."

Arimbi was deeply moved every time she heard that. She would feel guilty and start crying. She felt so lucky to have a husband like Ananta, and at the same time she felt exceptionally stupid, and ashamed, at what she was putting him through.

It was the shame that weighed on her.

Her parents must have been consumed by shame, too, whenever they saw their daughter on television, surrounded by a crowd of people and accused of taking a bribe. Her father phoned Ananta when he first found out and began angrily asking what had happened. But his anger waned as he heard the story, and by the end of it he was crying. Arimbi phoned her parents a few days later to tell them that everything was alright and that this was all just the ploy of some spiteful people. Her father spoke softly, trying to raise Arimbi's spirits and convince her that he and her mother trusted that she was a good person. Their daughter could never be a thief.

When Arimbi poured out her regrets to Ananta, he stopped her and said it was all his fault. "I was the one who coaxed you into making money on the side," he said. Another time he said

softly, "Forgive me, Mbi, it's my fault. I wasn't able to provide for the both of us."

Arimbi would cry uncontrollably in his arms upon hearing him say things like that. No, it's not your fault, she thought; I did it because I wanted to. It was only because of her stupidity that all this happened. Forget about buying a house now; they could barely afford to get by from day to day.

In jail, everything had a price. Ananta had to slip ten thousand to each guard at the three gates that he had to pass through during each visit to the jail. If he came every day for a month, that meant spending nine hundred thousand just to get inside. If he didn't pay, there was no way he would be allowed to meet Arimbi. Thankfully Arimbi still received her salary. Ananta just had to go to the courthouse to get it. They were also lucky to still have a little left over in the drawer in Arimbi's wardrobe. But they didn't know how long this would go on for.

* * *

The courtroom was packed with people, most of them there for Mrs. Danti. Ananta sat in the very front row of the public gallery. There was a woman next to him. TV cameras had been set up everywhere, and photographers swarmed all over, ceaselessly snapping off pictures of Arimbi and Mrs. Danti.

Arimbi was seated next to Adrian. On his other side were three men, Mrs. Danti's lawyers. Mrs. Danti sat at the other end of the defendants' bench from Arimbi. She still managed to look stylish for someone who was in jail. Her earrings were large, and her lipstick thick and red. She was wearing a long-

sleeved white blouse, just like Arimbi, but the cut on hers was far more fashionable.

They would be tried together. They would meet in this very room every Wednesday. They would leave the jail together, in the same car, then sit in the court's holding cell until the start of the hearing. They still didn't talk to one another and tried to avoid looking at each other.

The first hearing belonged to the prosecutors. They took turns reading the indictment from a thick file, walking the court through the events of that fateful day, starting with Arimbi's meeting with the lawyers at the restaurant, until the arrest at Mrs. Danti's house. They accused Arimbi and Mrs. Danti of colluding to help parties involved in an ongoing legal case, in exchange for a bribe. The two lawyers, Sasmita and Rudi, stood accused of bribing court officials. They were standing trial in the same courtroom, but on different days.

Arimbi finally realized that Mrs. Danti had been under surveillance for some time. The KPK had seen her meet Rudi on a previous occasion, and had tailed him as well ever since. Everything came together on that particular day.

A loud commotion erupted as the presiding judge banged his gavel to mark the end of the first day of the trial. Those in attendance got up all at once and jostled for the exit. The reporters rushed to the front of the courtroom, some of them making a beeline for the prosecutors' bench to ask questions and request a copy of the indictment. The others headed for the defendants' bench and swarmed around Mrs. Danti, jostling to get closest to her. From where she sat, Arimbi could hear what she told the reporters.

"There's no proof that I took any bribes. Besides, the

indictment states that it wasn't I who met those lawyers. I don't know anything."

"But what about the briefcase full of money in your maid's room?"

"I've said it before, I don't know about the briefcase. My assistant came to my house and asked to leave it there because she had something to do. So I told her to leave it in the maid's room."

Arimbi flushed with anger at what she heard. She felt something boiling over inside her. Adrian could see it. He rubbed her back and whispered, "Let it be."

Arimbi bit her lip and closed her eyes. She wanted to block everything out. But the sounds only grew louder, echoing inside her head.

The first witnesses called to the stand at the next hearing were two KPK agents. They were the ones who had been tailing Mrs. Danti and Rudi the whole time. They gave the court a blow-by-blow account of what transpired that day. They had followed Rudi from his home in the Bintaro area to the restaurant in Tebet, where he met Sasmita. Not long after, Arimbi arrived. When all three were inside the VIP room, the agents seated themselves just outside the room and pretended to be diners. Arimbi suddenly recalled the diners she'd seen right before she went to the bathroom.

The officials also told the court that they'd seen Arimbi leave the restaurant carrying her rucksack and the briefcase. They saw her hail a cab and go to Mrs. Danti's house. They'd even noted down the cab's number.

At the fourth hearing, Sasmita and Rudi testified. There were more spectators and reporters in the courtroom than

before; the lawyers were considered the star witnesses in the case.

The excitement began even before the hearing got under way. A crowd had gathered at the entrance to the courtroom, where a man in long dreadlocks and wearing all black was standing, clutching a chicken. He appeared to be practicing some kind of martial arts exercise, at the end of which he ripped off the chicken's head with his bare hands – no knife or any other tools. People screamed. The man continued to move about, then flung the severed head against the wall of the courtroom.

The security guards shouted for him to stop, but he ignored them. He then walked into the courtroom, by the wall behind the judges' bench, and sprayed chicken blood across the wall. Two security guards finally came forward and grabbed him by the arms while trying to seize the chicken's body from his grasp. He resisted.

"I'm conducting a ceremony! Don't you dare interrupt!" he barked.

"This is against the rules. It's contempt of court. Get out!" one of the guards shouted.

The crowd watching swelled. The photographers were having a field day. Arimbi and Mrs. Danti watched from the window of their holding cell.

"The spirits are aiding me. Don't you dare try anything, or you'll suffer the consequences," the man shouted. He was panting as he struggled with all his might to break free of the guards. "Watch out! You'll get yours if you don't!"

The guards finally managed to remove him from the courtroom. Other guards quickly locked the door and began checking the other spectators. They didn't want anyone

connected to the dreadlocked man remaining in the courtroom. The man didn't appear again from wherever it was the guards had taken him to.

A woman entered the holding cell. It was Mrs. Danti's older sister. She went up to Mrs. Danti, who was sitting next to Arimbi. "It's all done. Ki Joko's left. Fortunately he managed to finish the ceremony," she whispered.

Arimbi felt her chest constrict. So he was a shaman that Mrs. Danti had hired. She was using every means she could to get out of jail. With her money, she could hire expensive lawyers. And also with her money, she could sleep comfortably in jail, much like she could at home or in a hotel. It wasn't inconceivable that she was also using her money to buy off the prosecutors and the judges. And now she'd hired a shaman.

Arimbi wasn't one of those people who didn't believe in sorcery. She'd heard all kinds of stories when she was little about the powers of shamans. They could make people sick, even kill them, without ever meeting them. They could also make people lose their minds and do whatever they commanded. The same thing would happen here in the court, Arimbi thought. Mrs. Danti would be acquitted, and Arimbi, having no money, would take the fall.

A bailiff came into the holding cell and said the hearing would begin soon. Mrs. Danti and Arimbi left the room and stood before the door of the courtroom, waiting for the judge to bang his gavel to call them in. There was a smell of incense in the entrance. Arimbi shuddered. The trial was getting scarier all the time. Now she didn't have just the judges and the prosecutors to fear, but also the power of the shaman. The incense smell was even stronger inside the courtroom. There was also the stench of blood.

Sasmita was up first to testify. Rudi was waiting in a special room for witnesses, with guards posted outside. This was the first time Arimbi had seen Sasmita since their meeting in the restaurant.

He didn't give a straight answer to any of the questions the prosecutors and judges asked him. His answers were tortuous and meaningless, and often he just claimed to have forgotten. Arimbi could only laugh inside. She knew everything he was saying was false. But she still held out hope that there was something in all he said that would set her free.

"Is it true that you gave a briefcase filled with money to Defendant Number Two at the Tebet Grilled Chicken restaurant?" the judge asked.

"That's not true, your honor. We did indeed meet that day, but only to chat. There was no briefcase with money."

"I have to remind you that you're under oath. Giving false testimony in a trial is a criminal offense. So I'll ask you again: Did you give the defendant a briefcase filled with money?"

"There was no briefcase filled with money, your honor," Sasmita said. His tone wasn't as firm. He sounded nervous and hesitant.

"In that case, what business did you have with Defendant Number Two at the restaurant?"

"We were just talking, your honor. We're old friends."

The judge repeated his question, trying to get Sasmita to trip and finally admit that "Yes, I gave her a briefcase full of money."

But Sasmita was a seasoned trial lawyer. He was a nimble talker, and he showed it. He was good at avoiding direct answers, and didn't once utter a word out of place. The judge persisted in his line of questioning. He repeated the same

questions over and over, trying to find a crack that Sasmita wouldn't be able to conceal. His questions were smart and often left Arimbi gasping, fearful that everything would come to light.

The judge also asked about the corruption case that Sasmita had been handling. He was trying to establish a motive for Sasmita needing to meet Arimbi and bribe her so that the case he was handling at the courthouse where she worked would run smoothly.

Arimbi was secretly impressed. None of the judges at her court were like this. There, they were all show. They just pretended to ask questions, when in fact they had already made up their minds in the case.

When the hearing reconvened after lunch, it was Rudi's turn to enter the courtroom. His face looked gaunt and his hair was disheveled. His clothes were wrinkled. He'd been kept waiting all day.

The judge probed him on his relationship with Mrs. Danti. How long had he known her, when was the last time they met, when did they last speak on the phone. Rudi answered the questions directly. Arimbi felt he was honest. She grew fearful that he would say something that would incriminate her.

"What was the purpose of your meeting with Defendant Number Two at the restaurant in Tebet?"

"I was just there accompanying a friend. I didn't talk much," Rudi answered.

Yes, that was true, Arimbi thought. Rudi had been mostly quiet the whole time. It was almost as if he didn't know anything. Yet it was he who had connected Sasmita to Mrs. Danti.

"What did your friend talk about with the defendant?"

"I didn't really pay attention, your honor. I was on the phone at the time."

"How is it possible that you met someone at a restaurant and didn't speak with them?"

"It was just small talk, your honor. There was nothing more."

"Were you aware that Defendant Number Two was the assistant of Defendant Number One?"

Rudi didn't answer right away. He seemed to be deliberating over what to say. He said slowly, "I didn't know. I only found out after I was arrested."

"So the whole time you were talking, you didn't ask her name, where she worked?"

"No, we didn't talk that much."

Mrs. Danti's maid was the witness at the next hearing. She looked frightened. She answered the questions in a barely audible stutter. Often she couldn't find the words in Indonesian and reverted to a mix of Javanese. The judge's line of questioning was different from before. He took a more relaxed approach than with the other witnesses.

"So on that day it was just you and the mistress at home?" he asked with a Javanese inflection.

The maid nodded.

"You shouldn't nod. You should answer yes or no. This is being recorded," the judge said.

"Yes, Judge."

"And there was a visitor who brought a briefcase?"

"Yes, Judge."

"So how did the briefcase end up in your room?"

"The mistress called me... She said the visitor wanted to

leave her briefcase... She wanted to hide it in my room until she asked for it again."

Aargh! Arimbi wailed in her heart. Everything could be arranged for a price. There was nothing left for her to hope for.

* * *

It was nearly nine at night when a guard arrived outside Arimbi's cell. Her lawyer was here, he said. That was unusual. Adrian rarely came to the jail. And he never came at night. Arimbi immediately imagined the worst. It had to be about the hearing the next day. It was to be the last hearing before the prosecutors read out their sentence requests, the day when she and Mrs. Danti would be questioned on the stand.

"Are you well, Mbi?" Adrian asked. He'd brought a basket of fruit. "Here's a little gift."

"Huh? Where from?" Arimbi asked in surprise. Her relationship with Adrian had always been strictly professional, even though she wasn't paying him. Adrian gave her counsel and defended her in court. There was nothing more to it.

"I just happened to pass by a fruit vendor on my way here. It's okay, keep it with you."

Arimbi smiled. She was still surprised, but happy. "Thanks, Dri. You shouldn't have gone to the trouble," she said with a laugh.

"So are you ready for tomorrow?" he asked.

"I guess. It can't be any different from the previous hearings."

"It's very different. Tomorrow's important because the court

will hear from you. In the other hearings we only heard what other people were saying."

Arimbi nodded. "Yes, I get it. I'm ready. You already coached me on how to answer."

Adrian laughed. Then he stopped and said, "It's like this, Mbi. I got a visit this afternoon... from Mrs. Danti's lawyer..." He stopped mid-sentence. Arimbi stayed silent, waiting for what would come next. Her heart was thumping. A stillness descended over the room.

"He wants to cut a deal," Adrian resumed.

"What kind of deal?"

Adrian moved his seat closer to Arimbi. Their forearms were touching. "Er... So it's like this, Mbi: Mrs. Danti is offering you money."

"Money? What for?"

"It's a large sum. Five hundred million."

"Yes, but what for?" Arimbi asked with suspicion.

Adrian leaned toward Arimbi's ear. He lowered his voice. "All she's asking is that tomorrow you deny that she told you to go to the restaurant."

"What? Has she gone mad?" Arimbi said angrily.

Adrian raised a finger to his lips to get Arimbi to lower her voice. But she couldn't control her anger.

"I thought you were really helping me, Dri!" she said in a high tone.

"Hear me out, Mbi," he said as he patted her arm. "I *am* helping you. With five hundred million you can buy anything. You're set for life."

"Can it buy my freedom? Can it get me out of jail? I'd have to be stupid to confess that it was all my fault."

"I've thought about all that. If you confess to everything, it'll

be seen as an expression of regret. They'll go easy on you. Besides, they'll see you as just a lowly official with no experience. You live in a boarding house and have no savings. Everyone will believe that you were exploited by the lawyers."

"Huh? That's easy for you to say. In that case, why don't I just say it was all my boss's fault, that she was the one who told me to meet the lawyers and ask for two billion? Everyone's going to believe that I'm a stupid underling who was used by her boss."

"The difference is that you won't get the five hundred million... and you'll still be in jail..."

"I was only told to do something by my boss. I didn't know anything."

"But you got your cut. There was fifty million in your bag."

Arimbi fell silent. She didn't know what to say or what to think.

"I'm speaking as your friend, Mbi. Take the deal. Whatever you say tomorrow, you're still going to be jailed. It was you who met the lawyers, you who took the briefcase, and in your bag in which they found the fifty million."

"But at least I won't get a long sentence if I did it on my boss's orders."

"That's not necessarily true. Remember, you did get a cut."

Arimbi didn't have an answer for that. Adrian pulled out a cigarette, lit it and took a drag. "I guarantee that you won't get a long sentence. Three years at the most. Even then there'll be all kinds of reductions. That five hundred million is for your family. You can buy a house and live happily with your husband. Three years won't feel that long."

Arimbi was moved at what he said. Her eyes misted over.

It felt like something was melting in her head and forcing its way out through her eyes. Living happily with her husband: that was all she wanted.

"But that's not what I told the KPK investigators," she said slowly.

"That's alright. The judge will only consider what's said in court."

The next morning Arimbi and Mrs. Danti sat side by side in the witness stand at the front of the courtroom. Mrs. Danti answered all the questions directed at her calmly and confidently. Over and over she said, "I don't know anything," and "The briefcase was Arimbi's." And every time she heard that, Arimbi felt as though a raw wound in her heart was being pawed. It stung. It hurt. It grew rawer and deeper. But Arimbi had made her decision the night before. The five hundred million would be her nest egg for a better future.

* * *

Ananta arrived at the jail earlier than usual. He'd brought a newspaper. Ah, it must be about the hearing the day before, Arimbi thought. She'd never read any of the news reports about her own trial. What was the point? They were only writing what they thought, Arimbi told herself repeatedly.

"Look at this," Ananta showed her an article at the bottom of the front page. Arimbi screamed. She hadn't read a word yet, but she saw the picture of Adrian right away, standing with his head bowed amid a scrum of reporters. He'd been arrested, just a few hours after Arimbi had given her phony confession for the five hundred million.

"He cheated us. He was in cahoots with those guys!"

Ananta said. His eyes were bulging and his face was red. He was incensed.

"And you fell for it. You should have told the court that it was all because of that woman!" Ananta said, his voice rising.

Arimbi bowed her head as she held the newspaper. She didn't dare look her husband in the eye. She couldn't hold her head straight and keep a secret from him; she hadn't told Ananta about the five hundred million. She kept the deal to herself, the same way she wrapped up all her hopes and dreams of happiness for Ananta. Happiness for the both of them.

The previous day, after the hearing, when Ananta asked her angrily why she hadn't told the truth, Arimbi said that it was Adrian's plan to get her a lighter sentence. By not saying that Mrs. Danti had set it all up, the judges would believe that Arimbi didn't have any intention of trying to score a bribe. How could a lowly court clerk, a typist, be expected to rig a high-profile corruption case? And how could someone who had nothing, who lived in a tiny boarding room with her husband, be capable of handling billions of rupiah? The lawyers must have exploited her, forced her to give the briefcase to the presiding judge in the case. Arimbi didn't know anything.

But that was only a distant hope now, after Adrian was arrested last night receiving money from Mrs. Danti. The money, the newspaper reported, "was to persuade his client to change her testimony." Now everyone knew that Arimbi's testimony was a lie. Everyone would be more convinced than ever that she and Mrs. Danti had indeed taken a bribe or hundreds of millions to help the defendant in the corruption case at their court. The newspaper didn't say that Adrian had been promised five hundred million to get Arimbi to give false testimony.

Now Arimbi would have to face the remainder of her trial without Adrian. A lawyer she didn't know was assigned to her. He was provided by the state. He only met Arimbi in court, and they didn't talk much. When they did, it was only small talk. Besides, what was there left to say about the case? There were only four hearings left, one of them being Arimbi's last chance to present her defense, before the judge banged his gavel to end the trial.

The courtroom erupted in a commotion when the prosecutors asked for a six-year sentence for Mrs. Danti and four for Arimbi. Those protesting were Mrs. Danti's family. Some of them cried and wailed, "Patience, Danti, patience... God sees who is wrong and who is right." One of the men stood on his seat and shouted, "Judge, be fair in your ruling. Don't listen to the prosecutors."

Ananta sat in silence, head bowed and crying. Then he got up and went to where Arimbi was, still sitting at the front of the court. Mrs. Danti was standing next to her, surrounded by reporters. "This is just the sentencing request. I'm sure the judge will rule fairly," she said.

People could hope and wish all they wanted, but in the end it was up to the judge to decide. And on the day of the ruling all the hopes disappeared with the bang of the gavel. The judge handed down sentences longer than even the prosecutors had sought. Mrs. Danti got seven years, and Arimbi four and a half. Arimbi felt her chest constrict. She would be locked up for four and a half years. But she harbored a minute sense of satisfaction. The judge couldn't be bought. He'd given Mrs. Danti a longer sentence than he'd given Arimbi.

Mrs. Danti refused to accept the verdict. She said she would file an appeal. Arimbi asked for time from the court, a week,

to consider whether to do the same. She talked it over with Ananta and asked her lawyer, and dwelled on it when she was alone in her cell. She finally conceded. She wouldn't contest the verdict. Four and a half years would pass quickly. Besides, there was no guarantee that an appeal court would reduce her sentence. More to the point, though, she had no more money to keep fighting.

Arimbi and Mrs. Danti were moved from the police jail to a larger prison for women in East Jakarta. They slept in the same cell the first night, squeezed in with four other inmates. There was a single, thin mattress that was barely enough for the four other inmates. Arimbi and Mrs. Danti took blankets and sheets from their bags and piled them on the floor to sleep on.

They still weren't speaking to each other. Arimbi talked a bit with her other cellmates, while Mrs. Danti clammed up, her expression listless and her brow furrowed. At night, as their cellmates slept, Arimbi and Mrs. Danti were still awake and restless. Arimbi lay still and closed her eyes, but her mind wouldn't stop racing. Mrs. Danti, meanwhile, kept tossing back and forth. She sat up at one point, grabbed a scrap of paper and started fanning herself. She was sweating all over. A moment later she lay back down, her eyes wide open.

Early the next morning, a guard called Mrs. Danti over to the door of the cell. They spoke in low voices for a while, then Mrs. Danti fetched her two suitcases and left. She never returned to that cell. She would stay in a cell specially built for rich inmates. Money always made things easy for Mrs. Danti, Arimbi thought as she watched her leave.

Arimbi's time in prison wasn't as trying as her first few days in the police jail. Going from one bad place to another didn't register as a shock. Nor did she feel sad anymore, because tears were part of her daily life now, so much so that she could hold them back better. Her sorrow hadn't ended; it had simply frozen over. And she harbored no more hopes of the judge overturning the decision so that she could go home right away. Any desire like that was lost with her decision to accept and not appeal against her conviction and sentence. For Arimbi now, every second was something she had to accept. She couldn't bear to think too far ahead, about the day she would walk free four and a half years from now. The more she yearned for that day, the more painful it would be to remember how much longer she still had to stay in this place. All she looked forward to each day was the coming of the morning, when she could leave the tiny cell after a night packed crammed together with her four cellmates. The sunlight streaming through the windows and the bars – that was what she hoped for each day. And it wasn't just her who looked forward to each new day, but everyone who had spent the night behind bars.

During the day, Arimbi would walk aimlessly down the corridors of the prison. She once stopped at a corner with potted flower plants everywhere. They belonged to an inmate who passed her time by growing plants. Arimbi wanted to do

something like that. She asked Ananta to bring her five potted rose bushes. She arranged them in front of the cell and watered them every morning and evening. She glanced over them dozens of times a day, and sometimes gazed closely at them when she wanted to be alone with her thoughts.

Eight in the morning was breakfast time, and someone would come around handing out rice packages. It was always the same: rice that was so hard it seemed only half-cooked, with chili paste and dry, flavorless tempeh. The first time she ate it, Arimbi had to hold back her tears. She hadn't eaten anything like it at the police jail because Ananta would come every morning with food. The police jail was close to his office, so he could visit several times a day. But her hunger got the better of her and she swallowed the rice. After three days of eating the same thing, she began feeling a twisting pain in her stomach and had to go to the toilet in the middle of the night. She had the runs.

The next morning, when she got yet another rice package, one of her cellmates, Tutik, said, "Don't force yourself to eat it if you can't. Here, have this. I took two."

Arimbi took the rice package she offered. It was wrapped up the same, but the food was different. The rice was softer. There were also stir-fried beans, salted fish and tempeh. "You'll need to pay fifty thousand per month for the food, so that you get a better package than the usual," Tutik said.

Tutik was the boss of Arimbi's cell. Every cell had its boss, who was usually the most feared, the biggest or the longest-serving woman in the cell. They tended to be fierce and liked barking orders and hit people. Tutik was indeed big, but she wasn't vicious and she never hit. It was Tutik who helped

Arimbi the most and showed her the ropes from the first day she arrived at the prison.

Tutik had been inside for three years now. She was two years older than Arimbi and came from Wonogiri. It was close enough to Arimbi's hometown that Tutik was always friendly and kind to her from the beginning. Once in a while they would talk in Javanese. She told Arimbi her story without any compunction. She'd left her hometown for Jakarta four years earlier to work as a maid in the household of one of her neighbor's grown-up children. It paid three hundred thousand a month, which was three times what she got paid for the same thing in her village. It was a lucrative opportunity, so she left her ten-month old baby with her mother. No one knew where her husband was. They never even married. They'd met a few times when Tutik's employer in the village had sent her to the market to shop. The man was the conductor on the bus that she usually rode. "He was an absolute cad. He persuaded me to have sex behind the market in broad daylight," Tutik told Arimbi.

When her belly grew big, Tutik stopped working. She lived with her parents, who did odd jobs here and there. After she gave birth, she tried to look for a job. But no one in the village would hire her. "They were scared I'd seduce their husbands," she guffawed.

When one of her neighbors offered her a job in Jakarta, she jumped at the chance. "Her daughter had just given birth, so she needed someone to help with the baby."

Everything went smoothly at first. The husband and wife would leave home for work every morning and return at night. That left just Tutik and the three-month-old baby at the

house. "He was like my own child. It helped me not miss my own child back home so much."

Then one day, the husband stayed home because he wasn't feeling well, while the wife went off to work. That was when the calamity began. "Most people wouldn't believe me if I told them. It was like a soap opera, you know. Even the judge didn't believe it."

The husband, she said, came to her room. "He asked where some of his clothes were because he couldn't find them in the wardrobe. Then, would you believe, he suddenly did this to me," Tutik said as she wrapped her arms around Arimbi's body. Arimbi was startled at first, then felt squeamish. They both laughed. "I screamed, of course, and told him to let go. But he began whispering, saying nothing was wrong and licking my ear. How could I not fall under? And he was handsome, too."

Tutik blushed as she told the story. Her tone was playful. There was no sadness, anger or regret in her voice. For her, what happened in the past was meant to happen. She retold it simply for the memory and for amusement. She spoke in detail and with much gusto about how the husband undressed her and kissed her breasts, and how they became one.

"I cried when it was over. I was scared his wife would get angry. I was scared I'd get pregnant. But he said it was alright. His wife wouldn't find out. And I wouldn't get pregnant because he came on the sheets. He was right... my sheets were wet. There was so much of it," she said, laughing.

That was the first of many times. And they didn't just do it when the wife was out of the house. One night, after midnight, when all the lights in the house were out and Tutik was fast asleep, there was a gentle tapping on her door. They did it carefully, not making a sound. From then on, Tutik never

locked her room when she went to bed at night. The husband came in whenever he wanted. Sometimes Tutik would be waiting for him. "What could I do, I enjoyed it too."

The night of January the fifth, two thousand and one, was one that Tutik would always remember. They were both naked in her room. Tutik was lying on her stomach between his legs, her tongue swirling over every inch of his long, dark manhood, when suddenly the door flew open. The wife began shouting and hitting Tutik on the back. She grabbed Tutik by the hair and slammed her head into the wall. The husband quickly pulled his clothes on and slipped out of the room unnoticed. The wife seized the broom that was in the corner of the room and began hitting Tutik with it.

"She could have killed me. Luckily I kept a knife under my mattress. Just a small one, for peeling fruit. I didn't want to die, so I stabbed her in the arm. I could have killed her if I wanted to. But I felt sorry for her too..."

The court sentenced Tutik to five years in prison for assaulting her employer. No one came to visit her in jail. She didn't know what her parents or neighbors back in the village had heard about the incident. She went through everything on her own, and from being a lost village girl with nothing she was now earning money in prison to send back to her family. The money came from cuts paid by other prisoners each time they received a visitor, as well as protection payments from the wealthier prisoners and tips earned doing odd jobs around the prison. "Maybe if it wasn't for me, you'd be worked over real good by everyone else, coming in here without any money."

Arimbi couldn't argue with that. The whole time she'd been incarcerated, first in the police jail and now in this prison, she'd seen how Ananta had to pay off the guards and even her

cellmates, especially the leaders. That was bad news for the prisoners who didn't have family or couldn't pay protection money. They were bullied by their cellmates, sometimes even forced out of their cell. They became playthings for the other prisoners, ordered under threat to do all kinds of things. For those with money, though, life was cushy and secure. And the more money one had, the more one could enjoy oneself.

Tutik was tall and had a large body, and from the moment she arrived at the prison she qualms about standing up to anyone who tried to bother her. She won fistfights easily. Word quickly spread that she was in prison for assaulting people on the outside. No one dared to mess with her. Tutik never had to pay protection money to anyone and remained safe.

Her friendly, talkative nature and the ease with which she laughed won her a lot of friends. And thanks to her own closeness to Tutik, Arimbi was not bothered by the other prisoners. She only paid what passed for a routine payment, sharing the wealth with the others, as it were, usually in the form of the food that Ananta brought whenever he visited. Ananta also had to slip something to the guards when he visited. "Well, that goes without saying; eighty-six!" Tutik said.

Arimbi was soon allowed to have a cellphone, which Ananta bought for her. It was a cheap one, nowhere near as good as the one that the KPK agents had seized from her, but it let her speak daily with Ananta, who couldn't visit that often. For the privilege, she had to buy phone credits every three days for the warden in charge of her cell block.

Tutik soon began working for Mrs. Danti. "It's not bad; it gives me a little extra to send back to the village." Every morning she would leave the cell, walk down the corridor and cross a grassy lawn to a separate two-story building. She would

return at night, usually just after eight o'clock. As they lay down to sleep, she would tell Arimbi about all she had seen and done over there. From Tutik's stories, Arimbi began to piece together a picture of just how good Mrs. Danti had it.

Tutik said the two-story building had five rooms for the inmates: two downstairs and three upstairs. Mrs. Danti stayed in one of the upstairs rooms. She had a large, soft bed and a large-screen color television set. She also had a kitchen built in her room, which Tutik couldn't stop talking about. There was more than just a gas hob; there was an electric oven in which Tutik could cook crackers without having to deep-fry them. There was a two-door refrigerator that was always stocked with food. And the room was always cool, thanks to the air conditioner installed above the door. But what really amazed Tutik was the bathroom, which was small but well-appointed with automatic fixtures. The bathroom was only built after Mrs. Danti moved in. There were two communal bathrooms in the building, one on each floor. But when the rich prisoners moved in, each of them chose to build their own private bathrooms in their rooms. Arimbi laughed when Tutik told her how she made it a point to defecate in Mrs. Danti's toilet each day. "You gotta take advantage when there's a nice sit-down toilet. So I force myself to take a dump there rather than do it back here," Tutik said each time she spoke of the bathroom; and each time she would draw howls of laughter from the other prisoners in the cell.

Mrs. Danti paid Tutik five hundred thousand rupiah each month for doing the chores a maid would do: clean up the room, do the laundry and iron the clothes. She seldom cooked, even though there was a kitchen. Mrs. Danti mostly ate food delivered from outside. But beyond her housekeeping duties,

Tutik also guarded Mrs. Danti to make sure nothing happened to her. From what she earned, she had to pay fifty thousand to each cell leader, as well as share any food that she got. It was for her own good as much as everyone else's, so that the other prisoners wouldn't get jealous of her and act out to exact justice.

Tutik had worked for two other wealthy prisoners before Mrs. Danti came along. One of them had been released and the other moved to a different prison. Tutik didn't know that Mrs. Danti used to be Arimbi's boss, and Arimbi chose not to say anything.

Once in a while they would cross paths in the corridor or out in the open yard, these two women who had once worked together. When they did meet, both would look away and refuse to speak to the other. Arimbi's anger toward Mrs. Danti had congealed in her mind. She had been misled, hung out to dry and forgotten. She remembered how Mrs. Danti had so callously offered her hundreds of millions to lie. Arimbi had done all that she had been told to do, but she never received the money. And now that both of them were in prison, Mrs. Danti was still living large while she was suffering, Arimbi thought bitterly.

For Mrs. Danti, Arimbi was an insolent, ungrateful young woman. She recalculated all the money she'd given her, including the last sum of tens of millions so that she could buy a house to start her new family. Mrs. Danti never forgot Arimbi's harsh words back in the police jail. And even though Arimbi had done as she asked and lied for the five hundred million, it had changed nothing. It was just money, Mrs. Danti thought. She was determined never to speak to Arimbi again until Arimbi apologized for everything.

Ananta didn't visit every day as he had done when Arimbi was in the police jail. It cost a lot each time he came. At every door he passed through he had to hand over ten thousand to the guard. And there were three doors to go through to get to the visiting room. The guards never actually asked for or demanded money. But if he didn't pay, there was no chance he would be able to see Arimbi. "Eighty-six," the guards would quip each time he pressed the money into their palms.

Arimbi had to do the same going from her cell to the visiting room. There were two doors she had to go through, and at each one the guards had placed a box into which she would put the money. Arimbi learned how the system worked from Tutik, who from the moment she arrived walked her through all the things that a new prisoner was expected to do. Tutik also told her that she was expected to pay something to the other prisoners on the cell block for every visit that she got from Ananta, as a gesture of goodwill. For every prisoner who left their cell to meet a visitor, she explained, hundreds of others expected a share of the good fortune, in any form. Sometimes it was rice with meat, other times cupcakes and fruit. Even boiled peanuts or banana fritters bought from a street vendor were gleefully accepted by the other prisoners.

Not everyone would get a share, of course, but there had to be something for each cell in the block. It would be up to the cell leaders to farm out the spoils. Sometimes everyone got a bit; other times there was only enough for the cell leaders.

It wasn't just food, either. Every prisoner who received a visit

from a family member had to share half the money that she got. It was said to be for security and to keep things running smoothly. The cell leaders always asked for their cut. Arimbi sometimes saw them searching a prisoner who had just returned from a visit. They would force her to strip naked to prove that she hadn't gotten any money from her visitor, which was often the case. When that happened, the cell leaders would glare at the prisoner and say, "Tell your family that there's no use visiting if they don't give any money."

One time a prisoner lied about not getting any money. They found two fifty-thousand-rupiah bills folded and stuffed in her panties. They took it all, even though they were only entitled to half. But that was the punishment for lying.

Arimbi was lucky that the leader of her cell was Tutik. She never searched her cellmates or ordered them to strip. She didn't even threaten them. Instead, she told everyone early on what happened to those who didn't follow the rules. Her kind demeanor made the others reluctant to cross her. So without being asked to, they would always hand over half of whatever they received from their visitors. And Tutik took whatever amount they gave, without asking how much they'd received. The only times she turned mean were with prisoners who were being troublesome. She also got angry whenever anyone badmouthed her employer, Mrs. Danti. She didn't know that Arimbi's own hatred of Mrs. Danti was as hard as a rock.

Ananta would visit twice a week, on Saturdays and Sundays. Fewer visits meant he wouldn't have to spend as much money, and going on weekends meant it wouldn't interfere with his job. His supervisor had called him in one day and threatened to fire him if he kept sneaking off during office hours and neglecting his work. The supervisor showed him the employee

attendance forms for the past two months; there were six empty check boxes in the row next to his name. The supervisor also showed Ananta a list of names and addresses. They were motorcycle buyers who had disappeared before paying off their loans. Three of the people on that list had been surveyed by Ananta. The supervisor accused Ananta of incompetence because he had failed to conduct proper checks on the buyers and approved them for loans. The office also suspected that he'd been bribed to approve them. If it happened again, they would report him to the police for conspiring to commit vehicle loan fraud.

Ananta didn't try to defend himself before his supervisor. He couldn't tell him that he was skiving off work to see his wife in prison. That would open him up to all kinds of allegations: If the wife was in prison, surely the husband was also a criminal capable of anything.

On the second of every month, Ananta went to Arimbi's old office. That was one of the perks of being a civil servant, Arimbi thought: Even though she was no longer working and had been convicted of corruption, she still received her salary, albeit without some of the extras.

With two sources of income, life went on. Ananta used his own salary for his meals, for the rent and to send money back to his family. His parents had no idea what had befallen Arimbi. They didn't watch the news, and Ananta preferred to keep it a secret from them. It was different with Arimbi's family, who, since she began working at the courthouse, would constantly watch the news to catch a glimpse of her face. They happened to tune in on the day she was arrested, looking pale and surrounded by reporters. Since then, they sat transfixed in front of the television every day, their expressions lifeless and

not saying a word, as tears rolled down their faces. Arimbi didn't want them to come to Jakarta. She asked that they just pray that everything would be resolved quickly. Her parents asked her not to send them any money. She would need it more than them, they said. Arimbi spent her entire salary in prison. There was the money to ensure she got decent food each day, money to buy phone credits for the warden, the visiting fees, and the food that Ananta would bring for her to share after each visit.

It was a Saturday morning and Ananta had brought two boxed meals from KFC. He'd just gotten paid the day before. He wanted to bring Arimbi something for breakfast that was a little more expensive than the usual coconut rice or padang rice. For her cellmates, he'd bought banana fritters and fried tofu from a street vendor.

As he usually did, he embraced Arimbi and kissed her on the forehead the moment he saw her. Time had taught them to control their emotions. Their visits were no longer wracked by crying and sorrow. Those feelings they kept hidden in their hearts so that they didn't show. Experience had taught them that the precious time they shared during the visits was wasted if they spent it wallowing in misery. So they chose to fill their time together with stories and laughter, expressions of love and yearning.

"There was a volleyball game yesterday and I played, you know," Arimbi said girlishly.

"You know how to play volleyball?"

Arimbi laughed. "I'm really good now. We practice every afternoon."

"That means you're getting big here," Ananta said as he squeezed her arm.

"No, not big, firm. I'm getting firmer all over."

"Ah, I don't believe you," Ananta said, running his hands over her arms, her back and her breasts. He then slipped his hands beneath her shirt. Arimbi never wore a bra or panties when Ananta visited. And Ananta always wore pants with a hole in the pocket. This was another thing experience had taught them. During the early days, when they were consumed by desire and there was no way to sate it, they would simply kiss in the visiting room, surrounded by others. No one minded. The other prisoners were busy with their own guests. Arimbi and Ananta would grow more amorous, stroking, groping and fondling each other.

Since then, every visit would be a chance to quench their desires. It wasn't perfect, but it did give them a sense of relief. Each of them found a way to make it easier for the other. Arimbi didn't wear any underwear, and Ananta made a hole in his pocket. He always wore the same pair of pants during his visits.

They later realized that they weren't the only ones getting off in the visiting room. The other prisoners were just as busy with their visitors and doing the same thing. The men would pretend to be reading a newspaper, which really served to conceal their lower body, while the women went into action. They wouldn't just use their hands, but also their mouths. The visiting room was always full, and the seats were long benches where people sat packed together, so it was always possible to see what the next person was doing. The first time Arimbi saw the couple next to her getting off, she felt uncomfortable, and ashamed that others would see what she and Ananta were doing. But the anxiety soon disappeared. If everyone was doing

the same thing, there was no need to be ashamed, Ananta said when Arimbi looked doubtful.

The sex that went on in the visiting room was a subject that the other prisoners back in the cells always enjoyed hearing about. For those who never received visits, it served to soothe their own longings. And for those telling the stories, it was a way of resuming the pleasure that hadn't been fully consummated. They didn't just talk about what they did with their visitor, but also what they saw others doing. Giggles and guffaws would fill the cells all night long.

The next day, Sunday morning, Ananta was there again. There were far more visitors on Sundays than on other days. Arimbi opted to wear a skirt. She'd planned it out since the night before. She wanted this day to be the most pleasurable and the most exciting, so that she wouldn't feel tormented waiting for next Saturday.

They sat on a bench in a corner of the room. Ananta unwrapped the food package that he'd brought. He didn't say much. His face was haggard and his eyes were red, as though he hadn't slept enough. Arimbi, who was brimming with passion, could sense that there was something different about her husband.

"Are you sick?"

Ananta shook his head. "I just didn't get a lot of sleep..."

"Would you like me to massage you?" Arimbi asked in a teasing voice. It was meant as an invitation to her husband to begin what they usually did. But Arimbi didn't get the response she'd hoped for. Ananta shook his head and moved Arimbi's hand off his shoulder. "Your father phoned me last night. Your mother's in the hospital."

Arimbi fell silent. She hadn't spoken to her parents in a long

time. It wasn't that she couldn't, but she didn't want to feel any sadder. Every time she heard news about her parents, she felt like crying. Talking to them over the phone would only make her feel even more miserable. Ananta told her parents that prisoners weren't allowed to make phone calls. He became their conduit to Arimbi, telling them happy things about her. "She's healthy," or "She's made a lot of friends," and then repeating their responses to her during his next visit. Now her mother was in hospital. Arimbi felt as though she was being forced out of a hiding place in which she'd found comfort: She couldn't stand to stay still, and she was too afraid to leave. She bit her lower lip, as though that would reverse the flow of tears suddenly streaming down her cheeks. Ananta responded quickly, pulling her to his chest. Arimbi couldn't hold it back anymore. She cried. Ananta didn't say anything; he just kept stroking his wife's back.

"What does she have?" Arimbi asked between sobs.

"I'm not sure. But she needs to have surgery."

Arimbi shivered at the word "surgery". Hospitals were an alien place for her parents. For decades neither of them had had to go near them. The only illnesses they ever suffered were diarrhea, cold, or coughs during the muggy period between the wet and the dry seasons. All these could be cured with a massage or cheap medicine that they could buy at the kiosk near the house. If her mother needed an operation now, it must be a serious condition, Arimbi thought.

"They want to take her to Solo tomorrow."

"What? Why all the way to Solo?"

"They can only do it there. The doctor told them to go there."

Arimbi cried even harder. "It must be expensive. How much money do they need?"

Ananta didn't answer right away. Then he said softly, "Your father's sold the orange grove. Hopefully it'll be enough for everything."

Arimbi cried more. She didn't say anything else. She couldn't think.

That night was an exhausting one for Arimbi. But she couldn't close her eyes. And the advent of the new day no longer meant anything to her, because she didn't want to do anything. She just lay in her cell all day, her eyes puffy and her gaze empty.

Tutik came up to her at breakfast. She unwrapped a rice package next to Arimbi's face and tried to coax her to eat.

"Don't make things harder for the others in this cell. If you fall sick, who do you think is going to take care of you?" she said.

"I don't feel like eating. I can't get it down..."

"That's all in your head. Try it first. Force yourself if you have to."

But instead of sitting up and eating, Arimbi burst into tears. "My mother's very sick. She's in surgery."

Tutik didn't say anything. She let Arimbi cry. She unwrapped her own breakfast and began eating with her hands. After two mouthfuls, she said, "So your mother's sick. Does that mean you want to get sick here too?"

She scooped up some more food in her fingers, but instead of eating it, she brought her hand to Arimbi's lips. "Come on, eat this."

"What are you doing, Tutik?"

"Well, if you're not going to eat, I'll have to feed you. It's your choice."

Arimbi laughed at that. She sat up next to Tutik and began eating.

"In here, you've got to think about how to resolve things. You don't go adding to your problems. Feeling sad and crying is just a waste of time. It's useless," Tutik said.

Arimbi didn't say anything and kept eating. But in her heart she agreed. That was what she'd been doing all along: solving her problems and enjoying what needed to be done. But her sadness, it seemed, couldn't be contained or hidden forever.

After three days spent in resignation, Arimbi finally steeled herself to learn the truth. She called home from her mobile phone and a man's voice answered. It was her father. After so long, they were finally talking again.

"Your mother's back home, Mbi. She just got back yesterday," he said after Arimbi asked how her mother was. Then he began sobbing and asked, "How about you, Mbi? Are you healthy? Don't fall sick, okay?"

It was Arimbi's turn to cry. "I'm fine, Father. I'm getting used to this place. I've got everything I need."

Neither of them said anything for a while. There was the sound of crying at each end of the line. After what seemed like a long time, Arimbi pulled herself together. "What was wrong with Mother?"

"They needed to remove a kidney, Mbi. They've done the surgery, it's alright..." Arimbi could hear him crying again. He kept crying. This was the first time Arimbi had heard her father in this state. Again it affected her and she began crying as well. Finally her father came back on the line in the wise, stoic form that she'd always known.

"That's enough, child. Let's be patient. All that matters is that your mother is fine... She's healthy, even though she's got to check in at the hospital regularly."

Arimbi heard his voice quiver toward the end, as though there was something else to say but he couldn't bring himself to say it. The line went silent. There was no crying, but no talking, either.

"What do you mean... check in, Father?" Arimbi asked cautiously. She'd heard of people with kidney problems who needed to have dialysis for the rest of their lives.

"It's just... Mbi..." her father said rather firmly. Then he began crying again. "I've sold the orange grove, Mbi. I spent all of it on the operation. I don't even know how we're going to eat. And now we have to go back to the hospital twice a week... for dialysis, they say. Oh, Mbi... Fate's been so cruel to you, and now this."

The tears welled up in Arimbi's eyes again and wouldn't stop. But she tried as hard as she could not to make a sound. Her father was destroyed, and she didn't want to add to it. He was crying as much for her as for her mother, and she didn't want to appear to be suffering or unhappy.

"Hush, Father," Arimbi said, trying to soothe him. "What if Mother hears you? It'll only make her worse, poor thing."

"I'm in the back yard, Mbi. Your mother's sleeping in her room. She's been inside ever since she got back from the hospital."

"When does she need to go back to the hospital?"

"Monday, Mbi... in Madiun..." He broke off crying again. "Hopefully I can get a loan, Mbi. Your poor mother..."

His words cut Arimbi to the quick. She felt guilty, ashamed and angry all at once. Guilty and ashamed because

she couldn't do anything; angry at fate, at the people who had rendered her powerless and behind bars. The woman who had brought her into the world was suffering, and the only way to ease the pain was through money. That was the only way to keep her alive so that they could still meet when Arimbi got out. But where was she to get it? She used up her own salary in a matter of days paying for all kinds of things in prison. And Ananta? Ah, all he had was love, Arimbi thought. His salary was only just enough for him to live on for a month. She couldn't expect him to make more. She'd known that since early on and she'd accepted him as he was. So be it if all he could give was love, Arimbi thought.

Arimbi cried all day long, from the moment she hung up the phone until night, when everyone shuffled back into their cells. She refused to leave her cell. All she wanted to do was lay there and cry. The three food packages by her side remained untouched.

Tutik, having just returned from Mrs. Danti's room, patted her on the back. "Don't feel like eating again? Do you want to kill yourself?"

"I've lost my appetite. Leave me be... Life's hard, anyway, what's the use?"

"Shush! What'll happen to your husband, then?"

Arimbi didn't answer. She curled up, turning her back on Tutik, and began sobbing.

"What? Why are you crying? What's the matter now, Mbi? If it's about your mother, you just need to be patient... Just pray for her to get well."

"Praying won't heal her..." Arimbi said with a sniffle. "Money can... Money for dialysis," she added before sobbing again.

"How much do you need? I might have enough saved up that I haven't sent home."

Arimbi cried even harder. Then she slowly let up and started laughing. "I don't just need it now. I'll need it again and again and again. A million a week to keep her alive."

"A million a week? You need that much for medicine?"

Arimbi shook her head. "Not medicine; dialysis. They removed her kidney so she needs to go for dialysis twice a week, otherwise she'll die..."

"Hush! Don't start talking about dying."

Arimbi fell silent. Tutik kept talking. "I have a million. I wanted to send it to my family in the village next week. But you can use it for your mother. It's alright, go ahead and use it."

Ananta sent the money to Arimbi's parents the next morning. On Monday night, Arimbi phoned home. Her mother had gone through the dialysis. There was nothing to worry about. She appeared healthy. Everything was going as it should, as long as she remembered to go for dialysis again on Thursday. There was still money left for that, the remainder of what Arimbi had borrowed from Tutik. There was a sense of relief in her father's voice this time. He gave thanks for everything, for the life lived that day, and for the hopes for the coming Thursday. Neither he nor Arimbi spoke about what would happen the following week. They hid whatever anxiety they felt so that they could at least taste the joy of the moment.

There wasn't a trace of that happiness left as the next Monday neared. Arimbi felt her head would explode. Everything in sight became blurred and dark as her eyes welled up with tears that she tried to hold back. She couldn't swallow

any food she put into her mouth. She couldn't see any way at all of finding money. Besides, she still owed Tutik money. In this state of mind, she wasn't even looking forward to Ananta's visit. She was all out of lust. She no longer felt that yearning that built up over a week. Ah, but love really wasn't enough for happiness, Arimbi thought.

Toward dawn, Arimbi went to the toilet. She urinated, then went back, passing by the four sleeping bodies in the cell. She lay back down and closed her eyes, even though she wasn't the least bit sleepy. She felt the woman next to her stir and bump against her. It was Tutik. They'd slept next to each other since Arimbi first arrived at the prison. Tutik flung an arm across Arimbi's chest. Arimbi let it be. She didn't want to wake Tutik. Besides, she was bound to move it again, she thought.

As she closed her eyes again, she felt Tutik's hand rubbing against her breast. She was startled for a moment, then ignored it. Ah, she's just sleeping, she thought.

But the rubbing didn't stop. If anything, it grew more vigorous. Tutik's hand rested on Arimbi's breast, then began groping it. Arimbi sat up and looked at Tutik, who was lying on her side with her eyes closed, and asked, "Hey, are you moving in your sleep?"

There was no answer from Tutik. She seemed to be fast asleep. Arimbi lay back down, convinced that Tutik was just moving about in her sleep. But a moment later, as soon as Arimbi closed her eyes, Tutik's hand slid beneath her shirt and began fondling her breast. Arimbi turned and glared at Tutik. Tutik was on her side, facing Arimbi, with her head almost touching Arimbi's other breast. She looked up into Arimbi's eyes and said, "Shhh... It's okay. I don't want you to be sad all the time."

"What do you mean?" Arimbi asked in a low, trembling voice.

"I don't mean anything. Just go with it, it's okay. You'll feel good, you'll stop being sad," Tutik said, her hand still caressing Arimbi's breast. She toyed with Arimbi's nipple and squeezed her breast, before sliding her hand down, beneath Arimbi's panties.

"Don't... don't," Arimbi whimpered, half crying.

"Shhh... It's okay. We'll think of a way to find money for your mother tomorrow."

* * *

Tutik held out five hundred-thousand-rupiah bills to Arimbi in the morning. Arimbi froze, partly in confusion and partly in disbelief. For a former maid who didn't get any visitors, Tutik had a lot of money. Sure, she got a wage from Mrs. Danti, but it was only five hundred thousand a month. And as the cell leader she got a cut of the visiting fees, but it can't have amounted to that much. She never shook down the other prisoners for money. Like Arimbi, the other women in the cell shared with Tutik what they could, usually fifty-five thousand a week. That was the money that Tutik sent to her family. If she had anything left, it was probably just enough to live just a bit more comfortably in prison. But the reality showed otherwise. The week before, Tutik gave Arimbi a million. Now she was giving her half a million.

"This is all I've got now. If you still need money after this, you're going to have to earn it yourself."

Arimbi frowned. She was rather annoyed. Just because Tutik was lending her money didn't mean she could lecture her. If

she could, Arimbi would have been earning already. She didn't want to have to beg, after all. But what could she do in prison. Did Tutik expect her to be a maid, too, or a cell leader?

Almost as if she'd read Arimbi's mind, Tutik said, "I can help you make your own money. It's a million a week, or four million a month. It's possible. It all depends on whether you want to or not.

"How do you mean? What would I do?"

"You have to tell me first whether you want to or not."

"How can I tell you when I don't even know what it is?"

"It's a matter of trust. I don't want you backing out after I tell you."

"Look, my mother is ill. She can only stay alive if there's money for her to go to the hospital. If there's some way for me to make money, I won't say no."

Tutik didn't say anything. It was quiet in the cell, except for the muted sounds of people talking, laughing and occasionally cursing in the corridor.

"Here!" Tutik sat down in the far corner of the room, as though she didn't want anyone else hearing what she had to say. Arimbi sat down next to her. Tutik took a sarong and placed it over their laps. The hairs stood up on the back of Arimbi's neck. She thought of what happened the night before, and while she'd enjoyed it, she was scared it would happen again. She thought of Ananta.

Tutik's hand disappeared under the sarong. Arimbi held her breath and squeezed her eyes shut, afraid to see what would happen next. The hand was heading for her, she thought. But she was wrong. Tutik's hand didn't touch Arimbi's body. Instead, she plunged it into her own pocket and pulled out a scrap of folded newspaper. She unfolded it to reveal a white,

flour-like powder. Tutik leaned over and brought the powder up to her nose. She took a long, deep sniff, as though she wanted to vacuum up all the powder. She then held the scrap of newspaper out to Arimbi, smiled, and said, "This is our money."

Arimbi went pale. She knew it had to be drugs. She'd heard lots of stories about people being arrested over this kind of thing, both those who bought it and those who sold it. The users got some kind of kick out of it, she'd heard, while the sellers got a lot of money. But what could she do with it? She'd never used it before, and she never wanted to, even if it was offered for free. She didn't want to get addicted and die in agony because she couldn't get more. But wasn't Tutik offering her a chance to make money? Doubtless she would ask her to sell it. Yet how could she, from inside prison? Even if she could... oh... Arimbi killed the thought. She didn't want to sell drugs. She didn't want to do something wrong and have to stay in prison even longer because of it. No!

"Relax, Mbi, this isn't anything dangerous. It's normal."

Arimbi's eyes widened. She wanted to refute Tutik's words with a shout, but her own words caught in her throat.

"This kind of stuff is common in here. There's no need to be afraid of it. All that matters is that you can earn enough money to keep sending your mother to the hospital."

Arimbi's heart jumped at the mention of her mother. She felt her entire body weaken. She had nothing left to resist with. "How do we do it?"

"Get it outside."

"What?" Arimbi was shocked. She laughed and said, "How am I supposed to get that thing outside if I can't get my own body outside?"

Tutik laughed. "Even I can do it. There are ways of doing it."

Arimbi said nothing, waiting for Tutik to continue.

"Your husband's outside, isn't he?" she cried out. "You just have to go along. You'll see how it works in due time. But it all depends on whether you want to or not. If you're just after four million a month, that's easy!"

Arimbi didn't answer right away. A silence descended on the cell. Tutik didn't speak either. She wanted to let Arimbi think it over. Finally there was a nod in answer. Arimbi would do anything for her helpless mother.

From inside prison, Arimbi worked and earned money. The white powder that Tutik had shown her in the folded scrap of newspaper became the source of her livelihood. It all started with the silent nod of acquiescence. In a half-whisper, Tutik told her how she could turn that white powder into money, even from behind bars.

In the first month, Arimbi did only as Tutik said. Tutik would give her the goods and a slip of paper with a name and address on it. Ananta would come to the prison, take the goods and deliver it to the address.

When Arimbi first told Ananta of the plan, he went pale and couldn't say anything. Arimbi persuaded him gently, trying to convince him that this was the only way out of all their troubles and that they would be alright. "Lots of the other prisoners are doing the same thing, and they're just fine," she said.

She could see that he was still doubtful and wanted to say no, so she brought up her mother and said something that would have moved anyone: "We have to do it, for my mother. It's the only way. Would you just let her die like that?"

Ananta couldn't refuse. His heart wavered as Arimbi pressed on. What could he say if she asked, "So what *can* you do?"

Ananta knew his place. He only made enough money to meet his own needs. He didn't have it in him to earn more than that. There wasn't that much money where he worked, he told himself. He wanted to do more, but he didn't know how. He and Arimbi had long reached a sort of understanding, one in which she never asked for more than he could give. Now, when Arimbi needed him, and when the solution was staring him in the face, it would be heartless of him not to agree, he thought.

The address for the first package he received from Arimbi was a hotel, not far from the boarding house. He received the money in an envelope. He didn't know how much was inside. He also got an extra two hundred thousand—for gas, the recipient said. The envelope went to Tutik, while Ananta kept the tip, which was outside of the money that Tutik was supposed to get. Ananta made identical deliveries three times that week, and on the following Saturday Arimbi got a million. The same thing happened over the next three weeks. There was always money when her mother needed to go to the hospital for dialysis. Ananta also made a bit on the side from the tips that the recipients of the packages gave him.

In the second month, Tutik shared her secret. She led Arimbi out of the cell, down the corridor and out to the cell block where the wealthy prisoners stayed. The cells here weren't as luxurious as Mrs. Danti's room, but they were still

much nicer than Arimbi's. None of the cells had more than two occupants, for starters, whereas Arimbi shared hers with four other women.

Tutik led Arimbi into a cell that was even more fully furnished than the others around it. It felt cool the moment they stepped in; the cell was air-conditioned. The paint on the walls looked new, a fresh coat of off-white. In the middle of the cell was a partition that divided the room into two equal halves.

Two women were sitting at a table, occupied with something. Tutik called out to them and they answered back like old acquaintances before greeting Arimbi. One introduced herself as Umi, the other as Watik. Arimbi had passed them in the corridors and seen them in the yard before, but she didn't know their names until now.

Tutik took Arimbi behind the partition. There was a woman lying on a bed and watching TV. Tutik spoke to her, "Cik¹... this is the one, Cik."

The woman got up and shook Arimbi's hand. "Aling," she said with a smile. Arimbi introduced herself.

"Come... sit, sit. Tik, get a drink from the fridge."

Aling motioned for Arimbi to sit on the bed. They sat on the edge, facing the TV.

"Tutik, Umi and Watik are like members of my own family. They know they're free to make themselves at home here. If they want to eat, they can eat. If they want to drink, they can fetch it themselves. All I care about is that they get their job done," Aling said. Arimbi nodded.

¹ Familiar term of reference for a Chinese-Indonesian woman

"Hey, Tik, how's your captain? All good?" Aling asked Tutik.

"All good, Cik. I've still got stock back in my cell. She asked to get her some more tomorrow."

"Her 'captain' is a court official and one of our regular clients now," Aling told Arimbi.

Arimbi squinted in disbelief. "Mrs. Danti? Mrs. Danti uses?"

Aling laughed. "It seems she'd been using for a long while, since she was outside. Isn't that right, Tik?"

Tutik nodded. "Yes. I only found out later myself. She's really good at hiding it. She only uses it at night. She keeps the goods in her drawer."

"So how did you find out? Arimbi asked, still incredulous. She'd known Mrs. Danti for years and had never suspected her of using that kind of thing.

Tutik laughed. "It was a bit of luck. I intended to offer some to her gradually. But she met me halfway. She told me everything, said she'd been using for a long time. She said it was all because of a prosecutor who was handling a drugs case... and what do you know, she's been doing it since."

"And now, instead of waiting for the goods to come from outside, she uses ours all the time," Aling said.

"Cik Aling's service is the best. Sometimes she even gives a bonus. Cik Aling likes to host a party or two there, isn't that right, Cik?" Tutik asked.

Aling nodded. "So now we understand each other," she said.

Arimbi tried to picture Mrs. Danti sniffing the white powder. To hear Tutik tell it, Mrs. Danti must have been an expert at using the drugs. She probably snorted it through a

pipe, a long pipe, or rolled it up and smoked it like a cigarette, Arimbi thought. Her eyes probably went blank when she inhaled it, like a drunk. She probably chattered incoherently, or perhaps she was so overcome with pleasure that she couldn't speak. Arimbi couldn't imagine that the boss she once admired was a drug addict.

"So, Arimbi... Tutik has told me a lot about you. Your work is good. Your husband can be trusted. That's why I asked Tutik to bring you here so that we're both on the same page. We're all sisters now: Me, Tutik, Umi, Watik and now you."

Arimbi smiled. She enjoyed being treated like this, being trusted with the details of a secret. Aling spoke at length about the workings of the business. She was arrested three years earlier while carrying drugs to a buyer. It was a new client, a young singer who often appeared on TV.

"Well, him being a new client, I wanted to ensure repeat business, so I delivered the goods myself. And as it turned out, the police had been watching him for some time," Aling said.

She was sentenced to eight years in prison. "What made it worse was that when I was making the delivery, I had a lot more of the stuff in my bag," she said with a laugh.

Aling stood up and took a pack of cigarettes from the TV cabinet. She lit up a cigarette and took a drag, then sat back down next to Arimbi. "But if God has planned something for you..." She broke off to take another drag on the cigarette. Arimbi laughed inside as she waited for Aling to resume. She found it droll to hear a meth dealer like Aling invoking God.

"I was supposed to be punished by going to jail, but the truth is that my business is doing even better in here," Aling went on with a smile.

"Why is that, Cik?" Arimbi asked. She genuinely wanted to know.

"Well, on the outside I had to play cat-and-mouse with the cops. The cops are usually easy, you just have to pay them off. But sometimes you get unlucky like I did, when they had a raid and they brought along reporters. Well, that was it for me, off to jail."

Aling got up again and went to the refrigerator. She took out a can of beer, opened it, took a gulp, then sat back down.

"In here it's safe. Look for yourself: I've turned my cell into a meth lab," she said, laughing out loud. There's no need to play cat-and-mouse here. You just have to remember to pay your dues and everything's fine. Eighty-six!"

Arimbi laughed. Now she understood and could begin to picture it. It was from this cell that the whole meth operation was controlled. The powdered chemicals to make the drugs were brought in from outside. Cik Aling's usual suppliers on the outside were the ones who brought the items to the prison. The guards, who were paid off monthly, would open the gates wide. If there was an inspection, it ended with a smile rather than a seizure.

On certain days people would arrive to pick up the meth. They were the ones who distributed it outside. Tutik's job was to weigh, pack and hand out the packages to each of these people. Umi and Watik worked inside the cell. Now, Arimbi and Ananta were part of the operation. Cik Aling's meth wasn't just picked up by distributors; it was also delivered directly to the customers through her network of couriers, which included Ananta.

"Most of the people that your husband delivers to are old clients of mine. They're accustomed to buying from me," Aling

said. "If you and your husband can find new customers, that'd be great. You'll get a bigger cut."

"I still don't know how, Cik."

"Take it slow. Figure out what kind of person you're dealing with, because once you make the offer, you can't take no for an answer. It could get dangerous for us. Look how Tutik did with her boss. She sized her up, and sure enough she was the kind that wouldn't say no."

Arimbi nodded. She didn't know for sure what to do, but her heart was saying yes. This was a chance to rebuild all those dreams that had been crushed to rubble. Anyway, she wouldn't be in prison forever. She'd already gone through a quarter of her four-and-a-half-year sentence. The rest of it would fly by, with sentence cuts for Eid-ul-Fitr and Independence Day. She would also be eligible for early release if she applied for parole and stayed out of trouble and kept paying her dues.

She broke her plan gently to Ananta the next time he visited to pick up a package for delivery.

"You're crazy, Mbi! I'm already stressed out over these deliveries, and now you're talking about finding new customers," he said when he heard her plan.

"When we first started this we were both scared. But it's turned out alright, hasn't it?"

"Yes, but that's because I'm only delivering the stuff. God knows what will happen if I start offering it to new people."

"But you haven't even tried yet."

"It's dangerous, Mbi. Haven't you seen how many people are in prison because of meth?"

"And even more are just fine. Look at us, for instance. You're a dealer now, you know. You deliver it where Cik Aling tells you to. Now you just have to find other buyers."

"Mbi, this isn't like selling a motorbike, where you can go around offering it to people. This is drug dealing. How am I supposed to pitch it to people?" Ananta was growing increasingly flustered. His tone was high and his eyes were red with suppressed anger.

Arimbi stroked his arm. "This is a chance for us. I'll be free in less than two years. We can start afresh. We can buy a house, have kids, start our own business. I can't possibly return to work. I'd be ashamed. We'll just keep taking my salary as long as they keep paying it."

Ananta looked angst-ridden. He took out a cigarette and began smoking. It was something he rarely did when visiting Arimbi. He didn't say anything.

"If we just keep going like this we won't have anything. It's all going to my mother," Arimbi went on. "We don't need a lot. Just enough for our nest egg. When I'm out of here and we have our own business, we can pay for my mother ourselves. We'll leave all this behind. We won't have anything more to do with the meth."

"Mbi, you haven't used it in here, have you?" Ananta suddenly asked.

"Never, I swear to God. I'm not that stupid. I don't want to fall into their trap. I'm just doing it for the money. Just for now. Then we can start a new life."

The conversation ended there. Ananta wouldn't say yes. But once outside, he began to do as Arimbi had asked. What else could he do for their future? How else could he hope to get a house, start a business, have enough to live on and send money to his parents if he didn't do this? Anyway, it wasn't forever. Perhaps this was the door to fortune that the Almighty was holding open for him, he thought.

Ananta began being friendly to everyone he met. At work, he would spend time chatting with his colleagues. It was something he hadn't done since Arimbi fell into trouble. With the motorbike buyers whose homes he visited, he would linger for long and talk about all kinds of things. He would stop by roadside kiosks to buy a pack of cigarettes, then sit there for hours, talking to passersby. On weekdays he would hang out at places near high schools. He would sit at the kiosks that the students frequented, just waiting for the chance to engage them in talk and sell them drugs. He did all this while still carrying out his job of surveying motorbike buyers and making deliveries for Cik Aling.

Back in prison, Arimbi wasn't just waiting around. She'd won Cik Aling's full trust. Every day she would go to her cell and help out in any way she could. She weighed, packed, kept a ledger of how much had been sold and how much money had come in. Occasionally she helped cook the drugs, mixing the ingredients as Umi and Watik instructed her. Cik Aling hadn't taught her how to do this on her own just yet; even Umi and Watik worked according to Cik Aling's instructions. Perhaps it wasn't the right time yet, Arimbi thought. Perhaps only a chosen few were destined to know how to cook meth.

Tutik, for one, didn't know the first thing about it. Her job was outside the cell, distributing the drugs to the prisoners who would pass them on to their visitors, and paying off the guards each month. Tutik was also responsible for dealing with any guards who tried to raise a ruckus in order to get more money.

At night, when Tutik and Arimbi returned to their cell with their three cellmates, they wouldn't speak a word about the drugs. Tutik would instead regale them with stories of what

she'd done that day in Mrs. Danti's luxury room, about how wonderful and ridiculous and occasionally infuriating she found it. It was the Tutik that Arimbi knew when she first arrived in prison, and the three other women who shared their cell were none the wiser about the secret she was concealing. The others were also unaware than every night in that cramped cell, among the tangle of sleeping bodies, these two women would submit to their lust.

The incident that began that night played out again and again the following nights. Neither of them said a word about it. There were no questions asked and neither of them brought it up. It was as though there was nothing special between them. It was like a secret that they hid not just from others, but from themselves, too. It was a secret that could only be felt, not put into words.

The first few times it was always Tutik's wandering hand that started it. She would hug Arimbi from behind and fondle her gently, before groping and clawing at everything underneath her clothes. The first night was the only time Arimbi said "Don't". On the nights after, she submitted in silence. The fear had melted away in the pleasure. She no longer imagined Ananta during those moments, and she felt no guilt or regret that she was being unfaithful.

On the nights that followed, Arimbi no longer waited in silence. When it was silent all around and their three cellmates were asleep, Arimbi couldn't wait to start touching. Tutik received her without hesitation. They both wanted it, and they both enjoyed it with no shame. Their lips would meet.

Sometimes when she was lost in her own thoughts, Arimbi would wonder who made her feel better: Ananta or Tutik? But she could never find the answer. They were both just as good.

She couldn't choose one over the other in terms of pleasure. When Ananta visited, she would be overcome by lust anew, and they would do it the way they usually did, in the visiting room full of other people. In those moments, Arimbi would forget about Tutik and give herself fully to her husband.

* * *

It took six months for Ananta to get a new customer; a high school kid he'd met at a motorbike garage. It was funny how things worked out. For months he'd hung around places near high schools, but he couldn't get a single student interested. Even talking to them wasn't easy. Just as he was on the verge of giving up, fortune smiled on him.

He was at the garage getting the oil in his motorbike changed. There was a teenage boy there getting his racing bike modified. It wasn't really a racing bike, just a sports bike that was a little bit bigger than Ananta's, but that cost three times as much. The kid was getting bored of waiting and sat in the seat next to Ananta's and began chatting. At first they talked about bikes, about different models and prices. The kid knew a lot about bikes because it was a hobby. For Ananta, it was part of his job to know about all kinds of bikes.

Perhaps this was what they called a match, when there was a warmth from the very start of the meeting, unintended and unrehearsed. When Ananta began talking, he wasn't thinking about getting the kid to buy meth. Perhaps that was precisely why this encounter proved successful. Everything flowed naturally and Ananta opened himself up as a true friend. The kid, Dodi, liked Ananta without needing a reason to. It was just a matter of them hitting it off and luck smiling on Ananta.

"I live near here," Dodi said, pointing down the road. Ananta couldn't see anything but stores. "Behind there, down the alley past that store."

"Oh, that's pretty close."

"Yes, that's why I come to this garage regularly. I come here every day. When I'm bored I just hang out here. Sometimes I tinker with my bike, sometimes I just watch."

"Don't you go to school?"

"Yes, that's after I finish school. It's a hobby, you know," he said, holding his arms out to mimic riding a motorbike.

"Your hobby is racing?"

The boy laughed. "I wish. Hopefully I'll be able to race for real one day."

He then delved into the kind of muffler, rearview mirror, even wheel spokes that he wanted. Ananta listened with rapt attention, offering up all the knowledge he had on the subject.

"If you want to buy, you should come to me. I'll take you to the dealer that my office works with. You can get it cheaper there."

Dodi became happy and excited. They traded phone numbers. Dodi said he would call soon. Ananta was pleased. "We'll arrange a time when I can take you there," he said.

Two days after their meeting at the garage, the kid showed up at Ananta's office. They'd talked on the phone the night before. Ananta took him to a parts dealer that wasn't very far from his office.

The kid didn't seem all that clear on what he wanted to buy. He asked about all kinds of parts, looked at the different types and compared one make to another. At first he looked at rearview mirrors, then mufflers, then wheels, then spokes.

Ananta laughed inside. The kid had just bought his bike two months earlier. It was in pristine condition and didn't need to have its parts changed. But, hey, that was his hobby!

The kid finally settled on a new muffler that he paid for with a credit card. That fixed it for Ananta: the kid would definitely be a customer, he thought. He didn't want to waste any more time. He moved fast to get even closer.

They had dinner together that night. Ananta began talking, not about bikes this time, but about themselves. He asked which school Dodi went to. He was in the eleventh grade at a private high school. Ananta then weaved a story about himself. He didn't tell him that he had a wife who was in jail. He said he was unmarried and trying all he could to get a girlfriend. The boy laughed. It worked like a charm to hook him.

"I'm tired of the dating game. It gives me a headache. I'd rather date my bike," Dodi said.

"But have you had a girl?" Ananta asked in a joking tone.

"Of course I have... You wouldn't believe it, but a lot of girls like me. But I gave up, for real... All they do is give you a headache, ask for stuff and try to hold you down."

Ananta burst out laughing. They had truly become friends. The next night he went with Dodi to an illegal street race. And for some inexplicable reason, he didn't go straight home after the race. He couldn't tell whose idea it was at the time, but soon he found himself in the kid's room, a roomy space on the second floor of a plush house. Ananta realized then that the boy came from a rich family.

Cigarette smoke filled the air-conditioned room as they sat on the floor, leaning back against the bed. Two beer bottles stood in front of them. They took a sip for every three puffs on a cigarette. The TV was on, though neither of them was

watching it. They were still talking about anything and everything.

Ananta held out a small pipe. "Try this; it's good," he said.

The kid took the pipe and inhaled. Ananta held his breath as the kid took the first drag. A minute passed. Two. Three. The kid didn't do anything. Then he took another drag, and Ananta breathed a sigh of relief. This kid would be a customer, he was certain. And that was just what happened.

Since that night, Dodi kept asking for more. Ananta charged him two hundred thousand rupiah for a half-gram packet that a group of six people could finish off in a sitting. Ananta paid Cik Aling two hundred thousand for a one-gram packet. For every gram he sold to the kid, he pocketed a profit of two hundred thousand.

The kid bought a packet once a week. In the first month, Ananta made just eight hundred thousand. It was less than what he earned delivering packages in order to pay for Arimbi's mother's hospital visits. As a courier, he didn't have to do much thinking. He just picked up the goods each day and went to the address he was given. He usually made three deliveries a day, and sometimes more. The more deliveries he made, the more he earned in tips.

"It was so hard to get a customer, and it pays so little," he told Arimbi during a visit to the prison.

"That's because it's just one customer. If you had five customers you'd be making four million a month. What if you had even more? Cik Aling says that everyone starts out using a small amount, then they use more and more, and they do it more often."

"Oh, Mbi. It was so difficult just to get one customer, and now you want me to get five?"

"I'm sure you can do it. You just need to keep at it. Keep trying. If you can get just five, then by the time I get out of here we'll have enough of a nest egg."

Ananta wasn't the kind to turn his back on that kind of persuasion. He might have appeared reluctant on the outside, but inside he was determined to make it happen. He put all his effort into it. He was constantly on the lookout whenever he was delivering drugs or surveying motorbike buyers.

Fortune, though, was a fickle thing. It could never be obtained when pursued. The people that Ananta tried to talk into buying drugs avoided him, crushing any hope that they might become paying customers. But when Ananta began to tire and was thinking about giving up, fortune rounded on him from behind and tapped him on the back. Once again it was Dodi who appeared to have been sent to him to show him the way out. The kid called him up one day and asked for seven packets instead of one at each delivery,

"A lot of my friends want in on this, bro!" he said over the phone.

"Are you serious?"

"I'm serious, believe it or not. They're all waiting. Can you bring it tonight?"

"Yes, yes! It'll be late, though, because I have to go pick up the stuff first!"

"Cool... eighty-six!"

Ananta laughed when he heard the kid say that. He remembered the stories Arimbi had told him about the court and about all the fees she paid in prison. Stupid kid, he thought as he laughed. But it was a happy laugh. He'd found his new customers at last. He didn't have just five; he had seven. Seven packets meant one point four million for him. If

they ordered once a week, he would make five point six million a month. And he'd still get the tips from Cik Aling's customers as well as the salary from his job. He would save as much as he could for his and Arimbi's nest egg. And they'd have enough to pay for Arimbi's mother's dialysis without having to dip into the nest egg.

August 2007

The warden summoned Arimbi. It wasn't an ordinary meeting, because the warden took her into the officers' room. They sat facing each other.

"It'll be the seventeenth¹ soon," the warden began. "And as usual there are going to be sentence cuts."

Arimbi nodded. There were always a number of cuts throughout the year, but it never felt like it as long as she was still inside.

"The cuts are common, everyone's going to get it," the warden said, almost as if she could read Arimbi's mind. "But there's also parole. You can get out earlier. You'll have to report back here regularly until you're free for real."

¹ Aug. 17 is Indonesian Independence Day, an occasion on which prisoners are entitled to sentence cuts

Arimbi suddenly perked up. Her whole expression was one big question mark. "Can I get it?"

"Why do you think I called you in here?"

"Oh, for real?" Arimbi was both ecstatic and impatient.

The warden nodded. "It all depends on whether you want it or not."

"What do you mean? Of course I want it. Who wouldn't want to be freed early?"

"The process is quite complicated. It's the letter, you see. It has to go all the way to the minister."

"The minister? For real, ma'am? How can someone who hasn't finished their sentence be freed? And now there's a minister involved, too."

"You don't believe me, but this is an official order. Anyone who has served half their sentence can be released early, as long as they've shown good behavior and can be trusted."

Arimbi's eyes sparkled. "So that means I can be released, ma'am?" she asked teasingly.

"Again, it's up to you. Like I told you, arranging the paperwork... it's a real hassle!"

Arimbi began to understand. She'd heard this kind of talk for years. This had to be about money, she thought. Fine, she gave in. Whatever it took to get out of that place as quickly as she could.

"So what do I need to do, ma'am?"

"I've calculated, and I figure you should be able to get out in December. But you've got to register first so that we can file your application for the seventeenth."

Arimbi didn't say anything, waiting to hear what the warden really meant to say.

"If you can afford it, we'll file your application. You see, it's up to us in the field to decide who deserves to apply."

"So what should I do?" Arimbi was growing impatient.

"The fee for everything is fifteen million."

"That's a lot, ma'am! What prisoner can afford to pay that much? For that much, it's only the wealthy ones who can afford it."

"Well, we've chosen. Not everyone gets a chance. We're giving you a chance and you're arguing."

"I'm not arguing, ma'am. But I just feel that that's too much."

"We've already calculated it. You still get a salary and you have a husband. You're both still young. The money's nothing compared to being able to get out early. But it's up to you if you don't want to. You'll just have to wait another two years."

"It's not that I don't want to, ma'am. But can't you come down on the cost? I can't afford to pay that much."

"That's the final price, Missy Arimbi. I might be able to help you get out even before December."

Arimbi gave up. She agreed. The warden gave her a week to pay a third of the fee: five million as the down payment, she said. "Have the rest of it ready and wait for process."

Arimbi felt a tremendous sense of relief after agreeing on the deal. The warden was right: fifteen million was a trifling sum for winning back her freedom sooner. She had too much to lose if she refused to play the game. No one knew what could happen in two years, or how much money she would spend in prison during that time. It might amount to more than fifteen million. But beyond that, there was something else worth far more than fifteen million in cash, and that was

the chance to be with Ananta once again, to start a new life with her husband.

Arimbi couldn't wait to share the good news. The moment she got back to her cell she called him on her phone. She told him all that the warden had said. Ananta had been earning easy money recently and had thirty million saved up in the bank, so he had no objections to paying fifteen million to secure Arimbi's parole. He said yes to everything she said and laughed. He imagined what it would be like on the day of his wife's release, and what their life would be like from that point on. They would live together again, enjoying each other's company and making love every night on a bed. Yes, love. That was the most important thing. They would make true love, not simply get each other off under cover of a newspaper. Ah, Ananta couldn't wait for that day to arrive.

As soon as she hung up the phone, Arimbi noticed Tutik sitting near the door of the cell and smoking. She hadn't seen Tutik come in because she had her back to the door the whole time she was on the phone.

"So you're gonna leave soon?" Tutik asked without looking at her.

"Not that soon; December."

"How much?"

"Fifteen. Is it too much?"

"It's about right. One of the women over in the next block was charged five million, but she still hasn't got her papers after more than a year."

"And you? Don't you want to apply as well? You've served more than half your sentence, haven't you?"

"I wouldn't want it even if it was free."

"Huh? Don't you want to get out of here as quickly as you can? So you can go back to your village and see your child?"

"And after I see him, what then? He still needs to eat, doesn't he?"

"What do you mean?"

"Money's the important thing. Money to eat. Money to buy all kinds of things. Out there I wouldn't know how to find money, especially back in the village."

"But surely you can't stay in here forever?"

"I've still got a few years at least. That's something. I can still earn money, still keep some back to the village. But once I'm outside, what am I going to do?"

"Well, you could start a new life. You could get a job. Just as long as you're with your family again and at peace."

Tutik laughed. "See for yourself later which is more peaceful: life in here or out there. Even Cik Aling, whose got so much money, prefers to stay in here."

Arimbi laughed. "Well, inside or out, it's all the same. What's important is to earn money and to be happy," she said with a laugh.

Tutik didn't answer. They both laughed. Suddenly Tutik remembered something. "Hey, when you get out, what are you going to do about your mother's hospital fees? Will you be able to find the money out there?"

Arimbi fell silent as she thought of an answer. Then she said softly, "Do you think I can still work for Cik Aling when I'm outside?"

"I'm sure you can, as long as you're careful."

Arimbi was ecstatic. The visions of her new life grew even rosier. She would be free, back together with her husband, and still earning money for her mother.

"You've got to be much more careful on the outside, you know. They'll be out to get you everywhere. It's not safe like in here!" Tutik cautioned her.

Arimbi nodded. She understood everything. She had nothing to worry about. Ananta knew more than anyone in here about surviving on the outside, she thought.

In the middle of the night, like the nights before, the two women embraced and fondled each other. But Arimbi felt there was something different about Tutik this time. Her embrace was so tight that Arimbi found it hard to breathe. The way Tutik groped her was also rougher, and her hands didn't linger on any one spot for long. Arimbi was uncomfortable, but she didn't say anything. She let it happen and tried to seek pleasure in her mind.

"Why did you do that?" she whispered when Tutik was done pawing at her.

"Do what?"

"It wasn't good. It felt rough."

"It was the same as usual. Your mind must have been somewhere else," Tutik said in an annoyed tone.

Arimbi didn't say anything else. She was afraid; afraid that Tutik would get angry and turn on her with that big body of hers. Oh, but Tutik never got angry, Arimbi thought. The fear gave way to pity. Tutik must have been sad to learn that she was leaving soon. Arimbi was the person she was closest to. What they did every night, the pleasure that they created together, the sense of mutual need and yearning—that wasn't something that could be easily forgotten.

In the days that followed, Tutik was a changed woman. She seldom spoke. She stopped talking to Arimbi. Whenever Arimbi asked her something, she would only answer yes or

no. She would stop by Cik Aling's cell for only a moment and not return. She had a lot to do in Mrs. Danti's room, she said. Cik Aling would nod and tease her: "Wow, seems like you're getting a big cut."

Tutik would just laugh and scurry off.

She would return to her cell later than usual and lie down with her back turned to Arimbi. They still slept next to one another; everyone had their usual spot, and Tutik's was left unoccupied until she got back.

Arimbi didn't know what to do, so she tried to get Tutik's attention. She would turn around, raise her legs, or wave her hand like she was shooing off a mosquito. It was all meant to signal to Tutik that she wasn't asleep and wanted to play together like they usually did. But Tutik didn't do anything. Finally Arimbi would get tired and fall asleep. When she woke up in the morning, Tutik would be gone.

It pained Arimbi to feel that she was losing Tutik with each passing day. But more than that she felt a sense of unbearableness and pity. What would happen to Tutik after she was gone? Who would she spend her nights with behind these walls? Would she quickly find another Arimbi, or was it only with her that she could share all that pleasure? Arimbi missed her already. She missed all the attention that Tutik used to give her, and the feel of her hands all over her body.

One night Arimbi couldn't hold back any longer. She hugged Tutik from behind and kissed her on the back of the neck. She caressed her whole body, from top to bottom. Tutik didn't respond at first and pretended not to care. But her body raged against this defense and struggled to respond to the pleasure it was feeling. Tutik gave in and opened herself up. She let Arimbi pleasure her. She enjoyed all that was given with no

more pretense. And she repaid in kind, using her hands, her mouth, everything she had to give Arimbi the same pleasure. They were both happy, basking in the enjoyment that they'd put off for so long.

"Soon you'll be gone," Tutik whispered when their game was over for the night.

Arimbi took a deep breath. Her chest felt constricted and her thoughts heavy. "I'll come and visit all the time."

"No, you'll forget all about me when you're outside. You'll be too busy with your husband."

"No, I'll miss you."

"Will you really?" Tutik asked teasingly.

"Just you wait and see. Besides, I still need to earn money from Cik Aling."

Tutik laughed. "We'll see. If you stop missing me, I won't give you any more of Cik Aling's goods."

Arimbi laughed with her, then stopped when Tutik raised a finger to her lips. "Shhh," Tutik whispered. Silence descended over the cell again. They held each other tight until morning.

* * *

December arrived, and the warden made good on her promise. She handed several sheets of paper to Arimbi. She was free to go as of today. Arimbi had already packed her things earlier in the day. She waited to be called by a guard who would escort her to the front gate, where she would be allowed to live an ordinary life once again. She hugged everyone she knew, except of course Mrs. Danti. When they saw each other in the yard, they refused to look at one another.

Tutik gave her a memento: the silver ring that she wore every day, and that now encircled the middle finger of Arimbi's right hand. Tutik didn't say much, nor did she cry like some of the other prisoners. She and Arimbi hugged each other tight and stroked each other's back. Only the two of them knew what that meant. It was enough to feel it, and no need for words.

Even though she was now outside, Arimbi wasn't entirely free. She was still under close watch. One wrong move and she could be sent back inside. She had to report back to the prison once a week. She was back out in the world, but she was technically still an inmate, at least for the next two years.

She returned to the boarding room with Ananta. Everything was at once familiar and new. She had a sense of *deja vu*; this was the same way they'd felt as newlyweds: full of love and yearning, and constantly pining, even though they saw each other every day, and optimistic about their happiness.

They made love several times a day: At night before sleeping, in the morning before Ananta left for work, and in the evening when he returned. Some days they had lunch together. Ananta would come home and they would eat in the room, then make love. Ananta would go back to work at one o'clock, his clothes slightly disheveled.

They lived like this for nearly three months, enjoying themselves and not thinking about anything. With two salaries and Ananta's earnings from selling meth, they didn't want for anything. They continued sending money for Arimbi's mother's dialysis and for Ananta's family.

Arimbi didn't want to go back home to see her parents just yet. She was reluctant to spent time away from Ananta. She told her parents that she'd been released and was back living

an ordinary life, working and earning money. Her father wouldn't stop giving thanks and declaring that this was proof that his child hadn't committed corruption. Arimbi laughed inside.

In those three months, they didn't give a thought to anything other than their own pleasure. Happiness was real when they were in each other's loving embrace, bantering and being one as they made love. There was no thought about the future, whether hopeful or fearful. Life for them was right this minute, right here.

But something like this was never meant to last long. Life was always ready to usher them down a new path, one that would change everything. This time it was through a miracle. A tiny soul had been planted in Arimbi's womb. Ecstatic and touched, Arimbi told her husband. He was stunned for a moment, unable to say anything.

"Say 'thanks be to Allah. We're going to have a child,'" Arimbi prodded her husband excitedly.

Ananta smiled and said softly, "Thanks be to Allah." Then he embraced Arimbi. He stroked her belly, which was still flat, as though he could feel the presence of someone new there.

"From now on you need to be careful and eat more nutritiously," he said, still caressing her belly. It was as though he was talking not to Arimbi but to the creature inside her, his future child.

Arimbi couldn't stop smiling. "They say you can't make love when you're pregnant."

Ananta laughed. "We'll get by... All that matters is that you stay healthy." They both laughed.

Their days were never the same from then on. Life was no longer about the moment they were in, but about their hopes

for the future. Every day they talked about a time that was still far ahead of them, about their child, its birth, the name they would give it, its cuteness and cleverness, and all kinds of fantasies. Their happiness was no longer just about their being together, but about the dreams they shared for the future. Everything they did wasn't about enjoying the moment anymore, but about preparing for a perfect life in the future with someone who was yet to be born.

"We're not going to have the child in this room, are we?" Arimbi asked one night as they lay in bed together.

Ananta didn't answer. He switched the channel on the TV, but only to hide the fact that he was flustered at not knowing how to answer.

"I think it's time we move," Arimbi went on.

"Do you want to look for a house to rent, or what?"

"If you think about it, you lose money renting a house. You keep paying for it, but you'll never own it. We'd be better off buying our own house and paying in installments. It doesn't matter if it's small, as long as it's ours."

From that day on, they began looking for a house. They rode from one neighborhood to another, starting with places that were close to where they lived now. They stopped at every house that had a "For Sale" sign out front, then jotted down the phone number and called it. Five hundred million, seven hundred and fifty million, one point two billion. Finally they realized that the house they wanted wasn't in those areas.

The following week they searched further afield. They drove south put of Jakarta, leaving the crowds behind. They searched for a housing estate that Ananta's friend had recommended. It was in Citayam, a suburb on the edge of the town of Depok. It was a vast area that had been taken over for a residential

development. There were several new houses already standing, but much of it was still empty lots or half-finished foundations and walls.

Beneath the scorching sun, exhausted after their long ride from Jakarta, Arimbi and Ananta walked from one part of the estate to another, accompanied by a sales official who told them everything about the properties and answered all their questions.

They were immediately drawn to a small house without a yard. It had two small bedrooms and a living room cum kitchen. It cost a hundred and fifty million, which was just what they wanted. It sat at the end of a cul-de-sac, so no cars would pass by.

"This can be like our own front yard," Arimbi said. She could already imagine the various kinds of potted flowers that she would grow and put outside by the road.

Ananta liked it as well. "If the child wants to run around here, it'll be fine, it's safe."

Arimbi nodded happily. She rubbed her belly as though she wanted to wake her baby up to see what his parents planned to buy for him.

They agreed to take out a house loan for the purchase. It would take three months to process their application. Ananta submitted all the necessary documents: his pay slips, a letter of reference from his office, their family card, and their marriage certificate. They were nervous as they waited for their application to be processed. The boarding room felt increasingly uncomfortable and transitory. Arimbi no longer felt like sweeping the place and neglected to change the dirty bed linen. The wardrobe was a mess. They kept saying, "We won't be here for very much longer."

Finally the news came: their loan had been approved. The bank would cover eighty percent of the cost of the house, or a hundred and twenty million, which they would have to pay back in monthly installments over fifteen years. The rest they would have to pay themselves. The loan couldn't be issued until they paid the down payment, which, together with the rest of the cost of the house, also included bank fees, property tax and administration fees. In all it came to fifty-five million.

Ananta checked their savings account. They had just over ten million left. He suddenly realized that they hadn't given a thought to money since Arimbi's release. Whatever they'd wanted, they'd bought. Every day they ate well, for the sake of Arimbi and the baby she was carrying, and for their own enjoyment. They'd also increased the amount of money they sent to Arimbi's parents, to show that she wasn't suffering anymore. There was also the money that Arimbi had to pay the prison guards during her weekly parole visits. And a large chunk of their savings had gone toward paying for her early release.

The money that Ananta got from dealing meth was spent as soon as they got it. It was true what they said, Ananta thought: No matter how much money one had, it was never enough. For days they thought about how they could get an additional forty-five million for the down payment. Even if Ananta was to get ten new customers, it still wouldn't be enough. Meanwhile, time was running out. The property developer and the bank didn't want to wait very long. They gave Ananta and Arimbi two weeks to sign the loan. Any longer than that, there were plenty of other buyers waiting for the house.

With two days left until the deadline, they still didn't know how they were going to get the money. All day long they

brooded, looking gloomy and anxious, and flaring up at the slightest irritant. They'd wanted a house of their own for months, and it was the only manifestation of happiness that they could envision. Arimbi rubbed her belly, which had grown large, as her eyes misted over. The doctor had predicted her baby would be born in two weeks' time. And now it seemed the little being would spend her days on Earth in his tiny boarding room. In her reverie, she suddenly thought of something. The life came pouring back into her.

"We can borrow the money from Cik Aling. She's bound to have that much."

Ananta tried to keep from smiling. He was overjoyed. This, it appeared, was the way out of their bind. "But can we really borrow from her? We need forty-five, remember?"

"Yes, let's try. I'll ask her."

They went to the prison early the next morning. Ananta picked up his packages and left when Arimbi told him to. Now it was just Arimbi and Tutik in the visiting room.

"So what brings you here?" Tutik asked in a cold voice. She didn't look Arimbi in the eye.

"I'm sorry. I'm pregnant, and the doctor says I shouldn't be going anywhere."

"Ah, just admit that you don't want to come visit. Life's good with your husband isn't it? You shouldn't make false promises!"

Oh, mercy, no. There's no way I'd do that. I'm here now, aren't I?"

Tutik ignored her. She pulled out a cigarette and was about to light it up. But she quickly put it away just as the flame from the lighter was about to touch the end of the cigarette. Arimbi was relieved. She was flustered when she saw Tutik

about to smoke. She was worried about her baby, but she didn't dare say anything. Besides, she'd come here to make good. She put her hands on Tutik's shoulders and rubbed her gently while saying, "I've missed you, you know."

"Hah! Bull!"

"It's true. That's why I came here," Arimbi said as she pinched Tutik's breast.

Tutik squealed, then put on an expression that said she wasn't amused. But it was only pretend. Her face was red; she was both embarrassed and happy.

Arimbi stepped it up. She gently massaged Tutik's back. Soon the massage turned into soft and intimate caresses. Tutik didn't say anything. She was silently enjoying it all.

"You're keeping well, aren't you? Here, I brought a lot of food for you to take inside."

"Humph, like we don't have enough food inside," Tutik said, still pretending to be angry. Arimbi giggled. She slipped her hands beneath Tutik's clothes, caressing her from top to bottom, lingering long on her breasts and between her legs. Tutik moaned softly. She closed her eyes several times, as though she was trying to enhance the pleasure that she felt. Arimbi kissed her on the back of her neck, tickling her with her tongue until Tutik moaned again.

"You... you really know how to get your way," Tutik said when it was all over.

Arimbi was taken aback, but she quickly replied coquettishly, "How did you know that I wanted something?"

"I can tell. I'm older than you. I told you before that life on the outside wasn't easy. There's a lot you have to deal with. And now look: a pregnant woman coming to a prison. What could you want if not a loan?"

Again Arimbi was startled, but she covered it up by laughing. Tutik said nothing as she laughed. When she was done, Arimbi said in a more serious tone, "You're right, I do need money. I don't know who else to ask for help."

"Hmmm... So you only think of me when you're in a bind?"

"It's not like that. I think of you all the time. I miss you, I even dream about you. But it's this baby..."

Tutik turned away. For some reason she didn't want to look at Arimbi's round belly. She hadn't said a word about Arimbi being pregnant.

"Look, I really need your help," Arimbi said. Her mouth was so close to Tutik's ear that Tutik could feel her every breath on the back of her neck.

"I was wrong... but I really couldn't come and visit," Arimbi went on as she held Tutik's hand. Her voice was plaintive and her eyes were red. No one could have resisted her.

"How much do you need?" Tutik asked, staring straight ahead of her.

"Forty-five."

"Four and a half million?"

"No, forty-five million."

"Damn!" Tutik yelled. She turned to face Arimbi, looking her right in the eye. "Why would I have that kind of money? Who do you think I am? I'm just a maid!"

"I know... What I mean is, I need your help to get a loan... from Cik Aling."

Tutik fell silent. She was thinking. She pulled out her cigarette again and this time she really did light it up. Before she took her first drag, she got up and walked several steps away. Neither of them said anything for a long time.

"What do you need the money for? Is it your mother again?" Tutik asked from where she was standing.

Arimbi froze. She wasn't sure how to answer. She didn't feel right saying, "I want to buy a house." How could she ask to borrow money for a house with the help of someone who hadn't seen a house in so long? Would Tutik understand that this was all for the little being who was about to be born? Would she see that this desire wasn't about wanting to live large or enjoy life? It was about trying to make a better life for the future. It was about planting and cultivating hope. Arimbi wasn't sure Tutik would understand. More than that, though, she didn't have the heart to tell her.

"Yes, it's for my mother. She has to have surgery again," was the answer she finally chose. She had a sense of fear and guilt when she said it, not because it was a lie, but because she was exploiting her mother as a means to get money. God, don't look at this as a prayer, she thought. Don't make my mother have to go through surgery just because of what I said. Arimbi started crying, but it wasn't because of her mother's condition; it was her sense of guilt. For Tutik, though, the tears unleashed her own compassion. No matter what, she loved Arimbi, and she couldn't let her cry like this. Tutik could understand if she wasn't able to visit earlier. Arimbi must have been happy by her husband's side.

"I'll tell Cik Aling tonight," Tutik said as she came up to Arimbi. "But I don't know if she's got that much."

"Thank you. All I ask is that you talk to Cik Aling. That's enough." Arimbi couldn't hide the relief on her face. Then once again she turned to flattery. "I know how much Cik Aling trusts you... Please ask for real. This is my only hope."

All night long Arimbi was restless, thinking about what

Tutik would tell her the next morning. She felt a pang of annoyance that, once again, it was up to her and not her husband to take control of this situation. She was eight months' pregnant and could only walk with great difficulty, and everything she did had to be carefully considered, yet here she was running back and forth to get a loan. But that was what her husband was like, and she'd known it since before, another part of her thought. Besides, she was the one that wanted to buy a house; she was the one who no longer wanted to live in the boarding room. But it was for all of them. That was how Arimbi reasoned with herself.

Early the next morning she was back in the prison visiting room. Again she asked Ananta to leave and let her wait on her own. She was the only person in the room. There were no other visitors that early. She waited for a while before Tutik appeared at the door. Tutik's expression was inscrutable, the same that she wore every day when Arimbi was still in prison with her. Arimbi couldn't tell one way or another what news she had.

"How's your mother?" was the first thing out of Tutik's mouth.

Arimbi froze. She didn't have an answer prepared. She hadn't thought about the lie she made up since leaving the prison the previous day.

"She's waiting for the surgery. She's in the hospital now," Arimbi said, not daring to look Tutik in the eye. "How's Cik Aling?" she asked quickly, not because she wanted to know but because she wanted to get off the topic of her mother.

"Cik Aling says she can help," Tutik said, stroking Arimbi's back. "But how will you pay her back?"

Arimbi didn't know how to answer. She hadn't really

thought about how to pay back the money if she got the loan.

"Cik Aling wants your husband to do her a favor, and after that you can consider the loan repaid," Tutik said.

"Another delivery?" Arimbi asked, her spirits suddenly buoyed. The way out was so simple, it seemed. Ananta made deliveries every day. A few more would make no difference, especially if they served to pay off forty-five million, she thought.

"But this is different. He'll have to go out of town. And there's a lot of merchandise."

Arimbi's heart skipped a beat. Suddenly she felt scared and doubtful, but she couldn't say why. She knew Ananta had never had to make an out-of-town delivery before. The only places he went to were hotels that were never very far from where they lived. He also never carried more than a few small sachets with him, which he kept in his pocket. If he had to go out of town, how far would it be? And how much would he be carrying? How much did forty-five million rupiah worth of meth weigh?

"It's not that far. Three places: Semarang first, then Surabaya, then Bali," Tutik said. She seemed to have read Arimbi's doubts.

"Will he go alone?"

"Yes, who else will go? Cik Aling doesn't trust just anyone. She doesn't have many couriers, and she sees your husband as someone she can trust. That's why she's willing to lend him that much money."

"But it's far. Will he know where to go? How will he travel?"

"He'll take the bus. It's safe."

"And the merchandise?"

"We'll package it here. He'll look like any random person going back to his hometown."

"Is it really safe?"

"Yes, but it all depends on your husband. If he's smart and can blend in and is wary of strangers, he'll be just fine."

Arimbi tried to quell her own fears. She told herself this was perfectly normal, no different to what Ananta had been doing this whole time. It's just that the destinations and the amounts were different. Besides, if they wanted a big payday, this was the way to do it.

"We're like sisters, and Cik Aling trusts us, so if you're willing, you can take the money right away. Tell your husband to come here in three days' time, early in the morning. From here, he'll go straight to the bus terminal and get on the bus to Semarang. He should be back in about a week," Tutik said. Then her tone changed as she stroked Arimbi's back and said, "When your husband's away, you'll come here every day, won't you?"

Arimbi smiled. She nudged her shoulder into Tutik's breast, and Tutik squealed coquettishly.

"Of course I'll come here," Arimbi said. They both laughed.

It wasn't difficult for Arimbi to ask Ananta to do as Cik Aling had asked. When Arimbi held out the forty-five million to show him, Ananta had little reason to ask any questions. He just wanted the next day to arrive so that they could sign the loan with the bank and get the keys to their new home. They would be able to start packing all their things tomorrow night and move in the next morning.

Arimbi was already living in the new house when Ananta

left Jakarta. They said their goodbyes outside the house, and a moment later Ananta jumped onto the back of a waiting motorbike taxi, heading to the train station, and then the prison. Arimbi never saw him leave the prison carrying a large duffel bag, a rucksack and a television box. All three were filled with meth. Arimbi only knew about them from Ananta, who phoned her when he was at the terminal and about to board the bus to Semarang. They didn't contact each other after that; Cik Aling had forbidden it. It was for their own safety, she said.

Arimbi had a lot of work to keep her occupied in her new home. She cleaned all the rooms and arranged the furniture. She took note of the things they would need to get right away: a couch, a refrigerator, a wardrobe, and various knickknacks for the baby who would be born soon. Arimbi could already picture the colors and materials of the items, and where she planned to put them. Unfortunately, she only had enough money for food. All she could afford to buy were some cheap potted plants from a traveling vendor. She bought five plants in small pots that she lined up outside the house, just the way she'd always imagined.

She wasn't worried about her husband. She told herself that everything was going smoothly. Ananta was probably in a bus right now, or switching from one bus to another, or roaming around Semarang, Surabaya, then Bali. Arimbi imagined him eating at a nice restaurant and visiting famous landmarks. The travel allowance that Cik Aling had given him would be enough for all that. Only once did the thought of him being arrested suddenly spring into her mind. She imagined him being charged with drug dealing and jailed. But she quickly banished the thought. Ananta had a travel allowance of fifteen

million. Surely he would know what to do to stay out of the police's clutches. Eighty-six! Arimbi thought with a smile.

Arimbi made time to go visit Tutik. She took the train from Citayam to get to the prison. Might as well, since Ananta wasn't around, she thought. She also didn't want Tutik thinking she was ungrateful. She wanted to say thanks, but she also had a yearning. She still wanted it.

Before, she used to get off in the visiting room with Ananta. Now, her hands went to work underneath Tutik's clothes. Then it was Tutik's turn to fondle Arimbi's breasts and caress her swollen belly. Arimbi always had the feeling that Tutik resented her pregnancy. Tutik never once asked about how it was progressing. She didn't even want to look at the baby bump. But now her hands were gliding all over Arimbi's belly, stroking it as softly as she stroked the other parts of her body. Ah, but Arimbi enjoyed this! When it was time for Arimbi to leave, Tutik made her promise to return soon. Arimbi promised. She, too, wanted to meet Tutik again soon.

After ten days, Ananta was still not yet back. Arimbi grew restless. She sent him a text message, but there was no reply. She tried to call him, but he didn't pick up. All kinds of fearful thoughts swirled through her. Had he been arrested by the police? Was he languishing in jail now, like she once did? Or had he gotten into an accident? Arimbi grew increasingly frightened. Inter-city buses often traveled at night. What if the driver fell asleep at the wheel and the bus plunged into a ravine? That was the starkest danger she could think of: Death. With death, there was nothing she could do, nothing left to hope for.

Arimbi cried during her next visit to Tutik.

"Why hasn't there been any news yet? I'm scared."

"Calm down. If something happened, we would have heard about it."

"I'm scared that something may have happened on the road... an accident..."

"Shush, that's enough. Don't talk like that. Just trust that everything is alright," Tutik said in a high tone. "How is your mother? Has she left the hospital already?"

Arimbi was once again taken aback by Tutik's question. Then she grew even more fearful. She had used her mother to lie to Tutik. Was this karma? Was her husband being punished because of it? She could only nod in response to Tutik's question. Then she bid a hasty goodbye. Back at home, she gave vent to all her angst. She cried in her room. Then she prayed. It was something she hadn't done in a long time, so long that she couldn't remember. All she knew was that she'd never prayed while in prison. Her excuse had always been that the cell was too dirty and cramped to pray in. But Arimbi realized that she'd actually stopped praying even before she was arrested. And tonight she was praying, pouring her heart out with her crying. A moment later she grew doubtful. She thought of what she'd done with Tutik. Would God still want to hear her voice?

The doubt made her stop. Arimbi couldn't go on recounting all that was gnawing at her and all that she wanted. She cried in silence. She threw off her prayer robe and lay down on the bed, her mind empty of thoughts. This new house suddenly felt desolate. Suddenly there was a knocking at the door, but it sounded like a dream. No one knew her new address. The knocking grew louder. Then she heard a voice calling out her name. Arimbi knew that voice. It was Ananta!

Their baby was born three days after her father returned. A baby girl with red skin and thick hair. Arimbi wept when the nurse at the hospital put the little creature onto her breast. She forgot all about the pain she had gone through over the past three hours. There was now only a sense of elation, happiness and incredulity.

She stroked the baby, explored every inch of her tiny body. She raised her little arms and counted her fingers. Then she traced her fingertip over the baby's mouth, eyes and ears. She was seized with wonder at this miracle before her. From that moment on she gave her whole heart to the tiny creature. She was now just a vessel that existed because of her child, for her child.

Arimbi also promised her every hope and every happiness. The first thing she would do was keep her baby away from all the suffering she and Ananta had been through. She must never know the inside of a jail. Her child must never set foot inside a prison, much less live in one. It was enough for the mother to have experienced it.

Everything to do with prisons frightened her now. She no longer wanted to visit Tutik. Gone was the yearning she used to feel; she didn't have time to dwell on the past. The birth of her child had given Arimbi a new life, one that wasn't a continuation of her past life.

Arimbi wept even more. The most important thing was to ensure that the child got everything she wanted. That way she wouldn't be tempted to take a bribe just to be able to eat well or buy a house. Nor would she have to resort to selling drugs just to keep her mother alive. But how could Arimbi make sure

her child had enough and keep her away from jail? The house they lived in was paid for by meth money. Arimbi's heart shrank. She didn't want to raise her child on drug money. Her child must be protected from that. But how? And how could her own mother back in the village stay alive if it wasn't for Ananta selling meth?

Arimbi kept all her worries hidden from Ananta. She didn't have the heart to spoil his joy. A sadness came over her each time he left home to go to the prison to pick up the packages. At first Arimbi managed to keep her worries from spilling over. But as time passed they built up inside her, trying to force their way out. One night, as they lay in bed with the baby between them, Arimbi shared her fears with Ananta.

"What if we stop having anything to do with the drugs?"

Ananta looked startled. He turned his gaze from the TV to his wife's face and looked at her closely. Arimbi shuddered under his gaze.

"In that case, what do we send your mother every week? How do we pay for the house each month? How would we buy anything?"

Arimbi didn't answer. She began crying. Ananta was puzzled. He got up and came around to Arimbi's side of the bed. He embraced her and stroked her hair. He wiped her tears away.

"Why are you crying, Mbi? Did I say something wrong?" he asked gently.

Arimbi shook her head. "No, no, there's nothing wrong. I'm just confused, that's all."

"Confused about what? Don't think too much. Think about the baby."

Arimbi's crying turned into sobbing. "It's precisely because of her that I'm confused. I'm scared..."

"Scared of what?"

"Scared that she'll go through what we've gone through."

"Nonsense! She won't end up like us. We'll teach her, we'll guide her, we'll watch her all the time. We'll get her everything she needs."

"But I'm scared that we're going to fall back into those ways. Now we're selling meth. What if tomorrow we..."

"Shush!" Ananta cut her off. He quickly hugged her again and whispered, "Our child won't be like that. I understand what you mean. I don't want to be selling meth the rest of my life. But now's not the time to stop. We still need a lot more money. There's no other way to get it."

Arimbi nodded as she stroked Ananta's arm. She understood and wouldn't try to make him quit. But she cried, too. She cried over their fate and cursed, for the umpteenth time, her stupidity that had landed her in prison. Now she was wracked with even more regret at having forced Ananta to start selling meth. But if she hadn't done it, what would have happened to her mother, she argued with herself.

In her disarray and fear, Arimbi once again tried to make her case to God. This time there was no more doubt. God must have known that everything she did was for her child, she thought. And God must have also known that she was a new Arimbi, different from the old one.

She vented her regrets at all times. Soon she began asking that her child would not turn out like her and Ananta when she grew up. She asked that they be shown another path so that they could cast off the yoke of sin for good. She never tired of repeating her wishes; at the very least it gave her hope.

It never occurred to Arimbi that the answer would come to her when she wasn't praying. There it was one night, as she was doing the monthly grocery shopping, beneath the bright lights of the supermarket and surrounded by high shelves stocked with goods—there was the way out that she'd long searched for. She bought more than the usual that night: Two cartons of instant noodles and ten items each of soap, laundry detergent, cooking oil and toothpaste. A surprised Ananta asked what she was doing. Arimbi simply said she was stocking up. But in her heart she was cheering. She would tell Ananta her plan once they got home.

Arimbi wanted to set up a small store. She turned the front room of their house into a store. There were no stores on the housing estate. All the people living here had only recently moved in. Most of the place was still under construction. Anyone who wanted to shop had to leave the estate to find the nearest store. Arimbi would start her business small.

Ananta was pleased to hear his wife's plan. He, too, saw a great hope down that path. He began to do some thinking of his own. He'd wanted to quit working for a long time now, but he didn't know if he could afford to. What if Cik Aling couldn't produce meth anymore, he thought. But if he and Arimbi had their own small business, he could quit without giving it a second thought. The money from the business would be enough for their daily expenses, and the money from the meth would be for Arimbi's mother's dialysis and for their own savings.

But Arimbi was thinking about it another way. "Once the business is running well, you won't need to keep selling meth, right? Hopefully it'll be enough."

Ananta didn't want to debate the issue, so he just said yes.

If indeed they earned enough later on, there would be no reason for him to keep selling meth, he thought.

At first the only person to buy things from their store was their next-door neighbor. But word spread quickly, and soon the number of customers was growing by the day. Arimbi went shopping every two days. Besides replenishing items that she'd run out of, she also bought things that her customers had asked for but that she didn't have.

Arimbi kept all her profits in a special drawer. The capital she kept in a separate place. She kept an eagle eye on the accounts and was careful about what she spent. She seldom bought anything unless it was for her child. Even then she calculated and recalculated, weighing whether it was really necessary or just something that she wanted to have. Every morning after seeing her husband off to work, she would rouse her will afresh. Her business needed to be big so that Ananta wouldn't have to keep visiting the prison and so that her child wouldn't have to live off drug money.

Her mind went into disarray one day when the baby began acting out of the ordinary. She was normally a quiet child, but this day she wouldn't stop crying all day. Arimbi carried her in a sling while she tended shop, trying to rock her to sleep. She felt the baby's forehead, neck and armpit repeatedly. She wasn't running a fever. Everything seemed fine, she wasn't sick. So why was she constantly crying.

Ananta came home earlier that day and they took the baby to the doctor. But she wasn't ill. The doctor checked and could find nothing wrong. "She'd probably just tired," he said.

Arimbi and Ananta were instantly relieved. But a moment later they were back to being flustered. The baby kept crying and didn't want to suckle or sleep. Arimbi was at the end of

her tether. Her tears began welling up as she cooed to the baby, "What is it, child? Go to sleep... Don't cry all the time..."

Ananta offered to carry her for a while. But no sooner had he taken her into his arms than she began bawling even louder. Arimbi quickly took her back. She rocked the baby and talked to her, even as the tears streamed down her own cheeks.

The later it got, the more desperate they became. They were haunted by all their worst fears, mingled with their sleepy minds and tired bodies. Ananta fed Arimbi as she carried the baby. He insisted that she eat even though she didn't have an appetite. "You've got to get something down," he said.

But she threw up after the first spoonful. Her body rejected it, siding with her mind. "I can't eat if the baby's like this," she told Ananta.

Ananta didn't say anything. He didn't know what else to do.

Shortly after ten that night, Arimbi's mobile phone rang. Ananta answered it. The baby's crying quietened slowly. Arimbi was relieved. Her intuition as a mother told her that the baby would be just fine. The crying would soon tail off and the baby would be fast asleep. It was just a matter of time, Arimbi thought as she rocked her baby.

Ananta had returned and was standing next to her. He rubbed her back gently and said softly, "Your mother has died, Mbi."

Arimbi felt her chest constrict. Everything seemed unreal. Then slowly reality hit home and she burst out crying, the mother now filling in for the silent baby.

* * *

It wasn't the sense of loss that Arimbi grieved for. It was her sense of guilt and regret. She lamented her fate and blamed herself over and over. In her mind, her mother fell sick because of her. Her mother suffered to think about her child's misfortunes. And Arimbi never got the chance to see her since getting out of prison. She was reluctant to at first, and later on she was pregnant and that changed everything. She couldn't just think of her mother; she had to think of her child, too.

Arimbi was also haunted by the thought that perhaps there was karma behind her mother's death—a punishment for Arimbi lying about her mother being on the verge of death. And sure enough it came true. When the woman who had brought her into the world departed from it, she couldn't be there with her. Again, she had her child to think of. She couldn't risk going on a journey of more than ten hours with a baby who wasn't yet three months old. Ananta went in her place, leaving early the morning after they received the news. Arimbi asked him to pass on her condolences and her regrets. When he returned, he brought with him a message and hopes from Arimbi's father. There were no words of disappointment or anger from the old man. In his message to Ananta he only wished for the best, for his child and his grandchild and the others yet to come.

Arimbi phoned her father every day after her mother's death. They never spoke for very long. She would often just ask how he was and whether he'd eaten something that day. Arimbi saw this as a way to make amends for her sins. Her sense of guilt eased a little after each call. She also didn't want to repeat the mistake she'd made with her mother, who died without getting any attention or feeling any joy from her own

daughter. Arimbi was determined to give her best, if only for her father. She tried to persuade him to come and live with them in Jakarta so that he'd be surrounded by his daughter and granddaughter, and wouldn't be all alone at home in the village. But he refused. He said he would be happier in his own house, living among neighbors he'd known since birth. Besides, over there he would be closer to his wife and could visit her whenever he liked. It was probably what she would have wanted too, he said. Arimbi didn't press the point after that. She no longer tried to persuade him to live with them. Her father also asked her to stop sending so much money. She should save it for her daughter, he said, for her school and her future.

Arimbi listened to these and other words of advice each day when she called her father. She never tired of hearing them, no matter how often they were repeated. She was always deeply touched by the words, which would prompt her to start feeling guilty about everything that had happened in her past. Every sentence her father uttered served to whip up her determination to make a much better life for her child, to ensure that she lived off money that was earned honestly, starting from that day onward. So she screwed up her courage one day and told Ananta again what she really wanted.

"My mother's gone, so there's no need to earn extra money," she said as they sat in the store.

Ananta didn't say anything. He reached out his hand to Arimbi's head and caressed her hair, then pulled her closer so her head was resting on his shoulder.

"The store's coming along slowly and we're earning enough to live on," Arimbi went on.

Ananta still didn't say anything.

"There's no need for you to still be selling meth," she said, this time in a higher tone.

The room went silent for a moment as Arimbi waited for her husband to respond. Ananta's brow was furrowed, as though he was thinking of what to say.

"We still have the monthly house installments to pay," he said.

"We can make enough... we can..." Arimbi's voice sounded hollow. She wasn't sure herself whether they would have enough if Ananta wasn't selling drugs anymore. Arimbi still received a salary. But it was only the basic, with none of the allowances, and it amounted to less than a million a month. Ananta's salary, well... Arimbi never really knew how much it was because he spent it all for his own needs and to send money to his parents. It was the money from the meth that allowed them to buy food and pay the house loan.

"Mbi," Ananta whispered as he caressed her arm, "I don't want to keep selling meth either. But let's run with it for a little longer. We need to build up a nest egg first. We can save up the money that we would have used for your mother."

"I'm scared. I'm scared that our baby's going to get dragged into this. I don't want her getting hit by karma. I don't ever want her going to jail," Arimbi said with a sob.

"Shhh... I know. It's okay. Our intentions are noble. We're doing all this for our child, so that she can go to school and get a good job and not be like her parents."

Arimbi agreed in her heart. That was all she wanted: for her child to get an education and a better job than her parents ever had. She wanted her child to live honorably and happily, unlike her parents. But why was selling drugs the only way to achieve that, she wondered. Arimbi cried harder.

"There, now, Mbi. Be strong. Our intentions are good. Nothing bad is going to happen. Just give it another four months, alright? After that, I'll definitely quit. We won't have anything to do with that again. Okay?"

Arimbi nodded, still crying. She understood with all her heart. It was only temporary, she thought. Ananta hugged her tight. He stroked her hair and rubbed her back, the same way he always did since the beginning. It made Arimbi feel safe and loved, and it made her cry inside when she thought of what she used to do with Tutik.

Ananta would hand Arimbi his drug money untouched. She managed it diligently, never touching it as long as she still had money left from her salary or the store profits. There was always some money left over each month, which she put in a drawer in the wardrobe. She counted it; if they could save this much every month, they would never need to worry about their child's future. She secretly wanted Ananta to continue selling meth, at least for a year or two years, until they'd built up a large nest egg. She was also secretly glad that Ananta hadn't caved immediately to her pleas for him to get out of the drug game.

Ananta returned home early one day with his face beaming. He greeted Arimbi more intimately than usual, then said excitedly, "We're in luck! Cik Aling's got a big order. I've got to go out of town again tomorrow."

Arimbi was surprised. She still wanted the drug money, yet she was scared at the same time. It felt like only yesterday that she was wracked with angst, crying all night and confiding in Tutik because there was no news from Ananta after he'd left town. All the visions that haunted her then came back to her

now: a traffic accident, a robbery, a raid by the police that left Ananta dead.

"Where are you going?"

"Just to Surabaya. It's only for a few days, not like before. If everything goes smoothly, I'll be home in three days' time," Ananta said. He hugged Arimbi from behind. "We'll be able to buy a car, so that you can go shopping easier. And it'll mean the baby won't be exposed to the sun every time we take her out."

Arimbi flushed. But she still harbored a sense of fear. "How much merchandise will you carry? How are you traveling?"

"I'll go by bus, it's easiest. It's about the same amount as last time."

"Isn't it dangerous?"

"Relax, I've done it before. I know how it goes. It's safe," Ananta said cheerfully. "Here's the down payment," he said, handing Arimbi an envelope stuffed with cash. Arimbi counted it: Fifteen million. "There'll be more once I get back," Ananta said.

Arimbi was restless from the moment Ananta left. She said all kinds of prayers for his safe return. In the midst of her worries, a call came in on her phone from a number she didn't recognize. It must be Ananta, she thought.

"So you've forgotten those of us here, have you?" a woman's voice said as Arimbi answered the phone. It was Tutik. She had never phoned Arimbi before, and it had been so long since they'd last met. Arimbi didn't particularly want to, and when Tutik didn't contact her, she thought it was because she'd already forgotten about her. Perhaps Tutik understood that Arimbi was a mother now, and that her life revolved around

her child's happiness. But now here was Tutik on the phone, just when Ananta was out of town. She seemed to have been waiting for this opportunity.

"No, I haven't forgotten, I've just been busy taking care of the baby."

Tutik didn't seem to care. She didn't ask about the baby at all. "Come over tomorrow. Your husband's away, right?"

"Oh, but I can't. My baby's still little, I can't take her anywhere."

"Ah, there's always an excuse with you! I don't care, tomorrow I'll be expecting you!"

"I can't... I'm not like that anymore..."

"Oh, so you're like that? You only come to me when you need something? And now you've forgotten everything. Well, it's all clear now! Watch out! You're going to need me again!"

Tutik hung up abruptly. Arimbi felt hollowed out. All kinds of visions flashed before her eyes. She saw Tutik appear, telling stories. There was Tutik again, offering her food; massaging her when she ached; fondling her breasts and her genitals; taking her to meet Cik Aling; handing over the envelope with forty-five million inside. Arimbi felt guilt and regret and fear and pity. She cried. But then she seemed to hear a voice in her head say, "Forget about her. Leave that all behind, for the sake of your child, for the sake of her future."

Ananta returned on the day that he'd said he would. He immediately hugged Arimbi and laughed. "I told you, right, nothing happened," he said.

Arimbi laughed and said teasingly, "Yes, but there was someone at home who was worried nonetheless."

With the money they got from Cik Aling they bought a

used car. It was an old-model Kijang in red, with the paint fading. Ananta bought it for forty million. They had fifteen million left over from Cik Aling, which they used to stock up on supplies. Arimbi's store was now full, and it carried a wide range of items. Her customers could find everything they needed there now. News of the store continued to spread by word of mouth. More people arrived with each passing day.

Ananta was still busy doing what he always did: surveying people who wanted to buy a motorbike, while still selling meth on the side. Arimbi didn't bring up her earlier objections. She stopped thinking of ways to get Ananta to quit dealing drugs. Let him be, she thought. The family still needed more money. Besides, everything was going smoothly.

But disaster, when it struck, was always sudden.

It was just after sunset and Arimbi was jolted by the images playing out on the television. There was her husband, surrounded by police officers. The voice on the TV described him as a drug dealer. Four younger men followed behind him, also flanked by police officers. The voice said they'd been holding a "meth party" in an apartment in Jakarta. Arimbi felt as though someone had punched her hard in the back of the head and then in the chest. She couldn't breathe. She was in pain. But she didn't know what it was. She didn't cry. She didn't know what she should do. Everything around her suddenly appeared to be an empty wasteland with no meaning. She felt she was lost in the dark. She gave up. She didn't have it in her to search for the light.

A shrill cry brought her back into reality. Her baby was awake. The child's cries grew louder. Arimbi snapped to attention. She hurried into the bedroom and picked up the

baby from the bed. She rocked the baby, but its cries only grew louder. Arimbi's own eyes began to water.

"We'll go there, child. We'll go see your father, okay, child? Because we still love your father, child..."





What's the highlight of a low clerk at a court? Monthly salary, uniform, or retirement benefits?

Arimbi, a typist at a district court became the gem of pride for her parents and the people in her village. She was a farmer's daughter who could become a public servant: working in uniforms every day, getting regular monthly salaries, and would rightfully own a retirement benefit in her senior years one day. Arimbi also became their rock of hope. Many people passed on their messages and their wishes through her. To them, a clerk at a court was omnipotent.

From an innocent clerk who knew nothing about anything, Arimbi adapted to and became a part of the shameless group of people at the court. Nothing was illegal when many people had done it. There was nothing to fear when many people consider it as a common thing.

The point was, 86!

Okky Madasari is an Indonesian novelist. She has been known to exquisitely portray social and political condition of the contemporary Indonesia. She won Khatulistiwa Literary Award (Indonesia's prestigious literary prize) for her novel *Maryam—The Outcast* (2012) which revolves around people who are displaced due to their beliefs and then banned into exile. Her first novel, *Entrok—The Years of the Voiceless* (2010) which tells a story about military dominance during Indonesia's New Order Era. Her other novels are *86* (2011) which raises the problems of massive corruption in Indonesia today and *Pasung Jiwa—Bound* (2013) which touches freedom of the individual within the contemporary Indonesia.

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